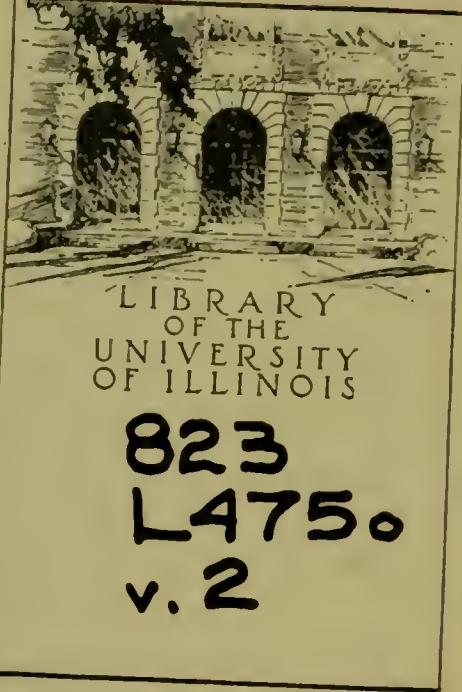


# ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

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FLORENCE MARRYAT.







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BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF

"LOVE'S CONFLICT," "MY SISTER THE ACTRESS," "GENTLEMAN AND  
COURTIER," "A CROWN OF SHAME," ETC., ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

VOL. II.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & CO.,  
31, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1889.

PRINTED BY

KELLY AND CO., MIDDLE MILL, KINGSTON-ON-THAMES;  
AND GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, W.C.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE PICNIC TO MAIDENHEAD.

HAVING dispatched the letter to Woolwich that was to blight young Fergusson's hopes, Lord Rhylton walked into the drawing-room prepared to make himself very agreeable to Colonel de Crespigny. He really wished his daughter to marry this man. That he was not of a noble family was nothing in his eyes, compared to the fact that he possessed a princely fortune. The earl had already felt the inconvenience of inheriting an empty title without the means of maintaining it, and he had suffered so much in the bygone days from impecuniosity, that he had come to the conclusion that money was the very best

thing this world can afford. To contemplate the probability that his beautiful daughter (after having been brought up in need and poverty) should link herself for life to a poor man without any fixed income, was most distasteful to him, as it would have been to any father. He rejected the idea with scorn, and only believed himself to be doing his duty as a parent, in breaking off an engagement which had never received his sanction. Muriel's grief troubled him but little. Girls cried for anything, and all she wanted was a new lover to dry up her tears. And that lover, Lord Rhyton was determined should be his old friend Arthur de Crespigny. As soon as he entered the drawing-room, a general cry arose for Lady Muriel, who had promised to return and give them some music.

“She has a headache,” replied the earl briefly, “and has retired to rest, leaving me to make her excuses to the company.”

Cecilia Seton flew after her friend at once, and Colonel de Crespigny directed an anxious glance towards Lord Rhylton, who smiled to meet it.

“It’s all right, my dear fellow,” he whispered, as he led the colonel a little aside. “My daughter and I had a slight dispute about this picnic to Maidenhead, which ended in such a burst of tears on her part, that I was forced to give in. But you must promise to look after her for me, de Crespigny. There will be a lot of young fellows there, I conclude, and Muriel is a prize that I don’t intend the firstcomer to carry off.”

“And yet you are not afraid to trust her to *me*,” said the colonel with a significant look.

“No, my dear de Crespigny, frankly, I should *not* mind trusting her to you for ever, nor do I think Muriel would require much pressing to give her own consent. I conclude all the tears I have been subjected to were

shed on your account, for she does not seem to be over and above attached to my cousin Amelia. However I know she will be safe with you, and therefore I have consented that she and Miss Seton shall join the river party on Thursday."

"I can't pretend to misunderstand your meaning, Rhylton, and your consent makes me very happy. You must have seen my admiration for Lady Muriel, and I have told you that it is my earnest wish to settle again —therefore I shall do my best now to win her favour."

"And I wish you every luck," replied the earl.

Lady Rhylton (who would never be kept out of any conference) had wheedled her way into this, and added her congratulations to those of her husband. Indeed she had already been doing everything in her power to further Colonel de Crespigny's suit, and missed no opportunity of leaving him alone

with her step-daughter. Ever since she had seen Lady Muriel's fair and delicate beauty (which made her own look coarse and over-blown by comparison), she had earnestly wished to get rid of her again, and the only means to do so she knew were by marriage. She was sincerely delighted therefore to think it might occur so soon, and assured the colonel he had only to go in and win, for she was certain that her lovely step-daughter had lost her heart to him in Paris, she fretted so palpably on their separation. Colonel de Crespigny was quite ready to believe all the flattery she lavished on him. He was intensely conceited where women were concerned, and thought he had only to exert his power, to win any female heart in the world. He did not believe either in a lengthened courtship, but thought the fair sex admired force and courage more than any other qualities in men, and that the way to take a citadel was to storm it without warn-

ing. He thanked his friends therefore for their good wishes as though Lady Muriel Damer were already his own; and returned to London as assured of her consent as though her hand were in his possession. He had heard all about the Revranches admirer from Miss Rutherford (who loved to place little confidences in him as if he were her nearest friend), but he did not believe in him any more than Lord Rhylton did. What girl of eighteen had not had her boy lovers, and forgotten them as soon as they were out of sight? And if not he flattered himself he knew how to displace a youthful memory, and Lady Muriel, once his wife, he would take good care she had no lovers but himself. He had no real faith in either men or women, and treated the whole subject of love and matrimony in a very airy style, but he had immense faith in himself, and believed that in all cases he had but to ask, to obtain—but to command, to be obeyed.

Meanwhile, though confidences were being exchanged between the step-sisters, they did not concern Athol Fergusson. Muriel seemed (all of a sudden) to have become years older than her age, and to have learnt the reticence of a woman of the world. The thoughts, which she had poured so freely into the ear of Lina Walford, she kept in her own bosom now, as if they were something wrong. The artificial atmosphere into which she had been introduced, had already influenced her mind, and made her ashamed of having been so foolish as to plight her faith to an ineligible candidate for matrimony. Athol Fergusson seemed such a simple boy beside such men as Lord Dornton and Colonel de Crespigny. She cried when she thought of him, but her tears were more for his disappointment than her own, and she almost wondered (even while she longed to see him again) how she could ever have been so silly as to let him talk

of marriage to her. But she had another source of trouble to weep over with Cecilia, and that was, the scanty allowance her father proposed to make her. However—she asked amidst her sobs—was she to dress decently, and defray her other expenses, on a hundred pounds a year? Why Cecil's ordinary morning gowns cost ten and twelve pounds apiece, and she had given three guineas for a sunshade only the week before, and when in addition to these Lady Muriel remembered the Arab pony and the St. Bernard dog, and the many other extravagant fancies of which Miss Seton thought nothing, she wept anew with despair at ever being able to imitate her.

Cecil was very ready with her sympathy on this subject and quite as indignant as her sister. From the point of view of two thousand a year in her own right, it seemed utterly impossible to her that any lady could dress on a hundred pounds. She

declared her step-father to be stingy and niggardly and unreasonable, and that her mamma should speak to him at once and show him what an absurdity he expected, in imagining his daughter could manage on so small a sum.

“But that will be no use, dear Cissy,” replied Muriel, “because papa has no more to give me. He explained it all to me this evening, and he is so poor himself he cannot keep up his position.”

“Then mamma must make it up to you, Muriel. She has more money than she knows what to do with—or *I* will, if you will let me.”

“No, no,” cried Muriel shrinking backward, “I could not take it, either from her or you, though I know you mean it kindly. Don’t you understand what I feel, Cissy? Papa and I are debtors to your mother enough already. I am ashamed when I think of it, that she should be so rich, and we so poor.”

"Oh, that's nonsense," exclaimed Cecil practically, "your father had the title, and mamma the money. She knew what she was about when she married him. It was a fair bargain, you may depend on that."

"But *I* was not included in it," replied Lady Muriel sadly.

"Oh, Muriel, don't talk like that," cried Cecil, throwing her arms about her, "or I shall think you are sorry it ever happened, and if it had not we should never have been sisters. Besides which, it is sure not to be for long."

"What do you mean?" asked Muriel.

"That you will marry, dear, and be perhaps as rich as we are. Oh! I am certain you will, and so is mamma. I heard her say to your papa, only yesterday, that with your beauty you should make the best match of the season; and that means the richest match, Muriel, for no one ever talks of a poor marriage as a good one."

"I suppose not," said Muriel sighing, "money seems to be the only thing people care for in this world."

"But what could we do without it, Muriel? See how wretched it is to be poor. You must have had some experience of that (from what you have told me) at Revranches."

"Don't talk of it," cried Muriel with a shudder, "it was too terrible. You never saw anything like it in your life. But, Cissy, tell me, is Colonel de Crespigny so *very* rich? Papa says he is a match fit for any girl in the county."

"Tremendously, I believe. Mamma says he has more than forty thousand a year. He came into it quite unexpectedly, about three years ago (through an old god-father), and he has a splendid place in Sussex, too, called Hetherington Close—but his wife died shortly after he got the fortune, and so he has never lived there. He is a handsome man—don't you think so?"

"Yes," replied Lady Muriel slowly, "but he is rather old."

"*Old!* Oh, that's nothing. What does it signify what age a woman's husband is so long as he can buy her everything she wants? And the rich men are always old, Muriel. The young ones have their fortunes to make, and when a girl has no money of her own, she can't afford to think of them."

"No, I suppose not," said her companion, with another heavy sigh; "but sometimes, Cecil, they are very nice."

"Oh, Muriel, you say that as if you were regretting somebody in particular. Surely you are not *in love!*"

Lady Muriel coloured like a rose.

"What should make you think so? All girls like young men better than old ones, don't they? And if I *were* in love," she added inconsequently, "what would be the use of it? Papa has just been telling me that I must make a wealthy marriage, or

he will send me back to that horrible Revranches. Oh! Cissy, don't talk of it. It only makes me miserable. Let us think instead of what we will wear at the picnic on Thursday."

Cecil took the hint and made no further reference to the subject, and whilst weighing the merits between sky-blue cambrics and French pink cashmères, Lady Muriel's mind became diverted from her trouble, and she went to sleep and dreamed she was going to marry a duke and had a *trousseau* that had cost ten thousand pounds.

Thursday dawned, fair and beautiful as an August day can be, and proving the lie to the proverbial picnic weather. The river party had been entirely organized by Colonel de Crespigny in honour of his own birthday, and he had engaged a steam launch to convey his guests, about twenty in number, to Maidenhead, where a sumptuous repast was ordered for them at the hotel. Poor

Miss Rutherford was in the seventh heaven of delight and expectation. She quite believed that the whole affair had been got up on her account, and that before the day drew to a close she would have received the offer she had so long anticipated. When she was fully equipped in a white muslin dress and hat, with a pink sash tied round her waist and a bunch of roses nodding over her brow, she might have aptly demonstrated the heroine whom the Frenchman alluded to when he said, he would give her “sixteen behind and sixty before.” But fortunately for her own peace of mind, Miss Rutherford had not the slightest idea that she was an object of ridicule. She could not conceal her satisfaction at the turn of affairs from Lina Walford, and played off so many girlish airs and graces at the prospect that lay before her, that her niece very nearly risked being left at home, for blurting out the bare unpleasant truth and rubbing

the scales off her aunt's love-blinded eyes. And that would not have suited Lina, for she too was looking forward with keen anticipation to what the day might bring forth. She was actively employed at that time in running a certain very shy little lordling to earth, and she trusted the river picnic might afford her the opportunity to capture her prey. Lina was twenty-three, and Lord Ernest Greenham was only nineteen, but where a title was concerned Miss Walford was not such a fool as to carp at the difference of a year or two. The young gentleman was still under guardianship, but he would come into plenty of money by-and-by, and all she wanted was (by hook or by crook) to marry him, and let the future take care of itself. And here let it be said, *par parenthèse*, that she did not succeed. In fact she never married anybody, but lived and died a maid—always pursuing but never overtaking—much after the fashion

of her Aunt Amelia. Such girls usually do. In every woman's breast there dwells a heart, eager to respond to true love from whom-ever it may come, and when she deliberately insults that heart—laughs at its weaknesses, stamps on its best impulses and refuses to allow it the liberty of choice—she kills it, and when she calls on it to wake, and love, she finds to her dismay that it is dead. We may laugh at love *pur et simple* in this money-grubbing nineteenth century, and ridicule the idea of its surviving the constraints of poverty, yet it is, after all, the very best thing this world can give us, and without it riches and promotion and flattery will never satisfy. It is true that we generally have to pay for it, by giving up something else on which we may have set our hearts, but if we cannot make a sacrifice for love, we are not worthy of it.

Lina Walford would have laughed till the tears came into her eyes at the foregoing

sentiment, and voted the writer to be an old-fashioned simpleton, who knew nothing of the exigencies of the world of fashion. But the day came when she would have given all she possessed for one honest kiss from a mouth that spoke the truth when it said it loved her. On this day, however, no such melancholy prospect loomed before her. She was full of life and health and believed her opportunities to be inexhaustible, and her chance of making a good marriage secure. She had attired herself in a most fascinating and fashionable costume, and her dark bright eyes shone dangerously, from beneath the broad brim of a Gainsborough hat. Lady Muriel Damer and Cecilia Seton, who were dressed alike in plain blue cambric gowns, with white chip hats tied under their chins with blue ribbons, arrived in Jermyn Street in good time, and eager to commence the promised excursion. Lina's spirits were so high as to be almost uncontrollable.

“Oh, Muriel, you detestable darling,” she cried, as soon as she found an opportunity of speaking to her alone, “*you* knew what you were about, when you made your new sister dress in blue like yourself. Why, my dear girl, you never did a cleverer thing in your life. Her yellow complexion (which turns green when shaded by the blue) makes yours look twice as fair as it really is. Mind you keep close beside her all day, and your fortune is made.”

Lady Muriel was genuinely distressed.

“Oh, Lina, don’t talk like that. How *can* you suspect me of being so ill-natured? Cecil is as kind to me as if she were my own sister, and I love her dearly. I wouldn’t try to look better than I usually do, at her expense, for all the world.”

Lina laughed incredulously.

“Ah, well, my dear, intentionally or not, *you’ve done it*, and so you may as well take the credit for a sharp thing. But don’t you

go poaching on *my* preserves. Remember, Lord Ernest Greenham is *my* property, and you mustn't interfere with him. Stick to your colonel."

"*To my colonel?*" repeated Muriel interrogatively.

"Yes, to your colonel. Are you deaf as well as blind? Can't you see he's head-over-ears in love with you, you silly, and ready to propose at once, if you'll only give him the chance?"

"But I thought he was going to marry Cousin Amelia."

"Bah! Would any man in his senses choose an old woman like her when he might have a young thing like you? What do *you* think? I'm afraid it's all up with auntie's chance there, and she'll have to follow a new trail. By-the-way, Muriel, have you heard anything from that young fellow at Revranches, that you used to pipe your eye over?"

“No,” replied Muriel in a low voice, as she turned away.

“I thought you wouldn’t. Boys like that are no good at all. They can’t marry you, and they only interfere with your settlement in life. It’s better to be here to-day, isn’t it, Muriel—dressed in that bewitching frock and hat, and going down to Maidenhead on a steam launch in company with a dozen eligibles—than making love amongst the turnips and potatoes to a subaltern without a halfpenny, eh?”

“Much better,” replied Muriel with a sigh. “I know that, so don’t let us talk of it any more. Hark! Cousin Amelia is calling us. The carriage has come. Let us forget everything, Lina, but the delightful day we have before us.”

She ran down stairs quickly as she spoke—only stopping for one moment on the narrow landing to dash away a tear that had risen to her eye—and entered the

drawing-room beautiful and radiant, her beauty enhanced tenfold by the glowing blush that overspread her face as Colonel de Crespigny came forward to meet her.

The colonel had made up his mind to put his fate to the touch that day, and win or lose it all. Only he never dreamt of losing. He was always very confident of his success with women, and he had some reason to be so, for he had been very lucky with them through life—not because of his worth or his wit, but because he possessed a large share of animal magnetism, which influenced the weaker sex almost against their will. This gift (if it may be so called) of animal magnetism, which some strong natures possess, is not sufficiently taken into consideration when we find our will succumbing (without any reasonable cause) to that of another. It possesses the same fascination as the basilisk's glittering eye has for the transfixed bird, as music exercises over the

serpent, as the mesmerist holds over the weaker brain of his subject. Not that animal magnetism has anything to do with the powers of the mind. It is generally people with small brains and largely developed natural powers that exhibit it most freely—such a man in fact as Arthur de Crespigny, whose one aim in life had been to gratify his sensual instincts, in whatever direction they might lie, and that without any consideration for duty, or the feelings of others. Dozens of women had acknowledged the force of his attraction, but not one remained that did not confess that she had been mistaken, and he was not worthy a single thought from a true heart. It would be well if women would sometimes sit down and draw up a written analysis of the character of the men they feel tempted to think too much of. They would be surprised to find how few can bear the test, and what a poor array of virtues they will

have to set against the vices. They judge of a man by what he is to *themselves*, whereas the true test lies in what he is to *others*. They will feel flattered by his jilting another woman for their sakes, being too foolish to discern that they will probably suffer the same indignity in their turn. An indifferent son and brother is bound to make a bad husband and father; yet women are so vain, they imagine a man can fail in every relation of life except that which he holds to themselves. Oh, blind and fools! How many of them will read these remarks with grinding teeth, and acknowledge in their hearts that they are true? The failure of marriage lies in the fact only that it has not been cemented with a good man, or a good woman.

Men and women with kind hearts, and active brains and firm principles, which urge them to do right for the sake of right alone, will make loving husbands and wives,

and turn marriage into the greatest blessing that life affords them. But all this time, Colonel de Crespigny is handing the ladies into the carriage that is to take them to the station, securing a seat for himself beside Lady Muriel, and doing his utmost to make himself agreeable to her. Could the poor child but have recognized the basilisk's fatal glance in his wide open blue eyes and fascinating smile, from what a world of misery she might have saved herself.



## CHAPTER II.

### LADY MURIEL SELLS HER FATE.

COLONEL DE CRESPIGNY's birthday party was composed of the usual elements which society considers necessary to the enjoyment of a day spent on the river—that is to say, there was an equal number of either sex, the women being mostly young and pretty, and the men ready to go to any length of flirtation with them, provided they did not compromise themselves. The steam launch was large, and eminently convenient; the refreshments which were provided to sustain the guests until they reached Maidenhead, delicate and liberal; the day, a glorious one, and the surroundings unparalleled. For placid and rural scenery—breathing of peace and plenty—there is nothing to excel the banks

of the Thames on a summer's day. The broad bright river, fringed with bulrushes and blue forget-me-nots, and planted with water lilies resting on their green leaves, amongst which the snowy-breasted swans sail about with proud bearing and elevated crests, ready to resent the least insult offered to their royal kingdom, is a sight of which the equal is nowhere to be found. And the pleasure boats which one passes on the way —the hired wherry, with its striped awning, full to the brink of danger; the swift canoe, skimming like a swallow over the water, with its solitary occupant in drawers and jersey; the house-boat, with its lounging chairs, and pots of blooming flowers and general signs of domestic comfort—all combine to make up a picture of beauty and of brightness that it does one good to see. To most of the guests on Colonel de Crespigny's steam launch the sight was doubtless no novelty (though it is one that never loses

its interest), but to Lady Muriel Damer everything was completely new. She had never seen anything like it in her life before, and could not find words sufficient in which to express her pleasure and interest. She sat by her host's side on the steam launch, a little conscious, perhaps, because of the hints her friends had given her, but looking all the more lovely for her confusion, and eagerly questioning him as to the meaning of everything she saw around her. Each man on board wanted to be introduced to her, and all the women (and especially Miss Rutherford) were jealous of her monopolization of the colonel, but it was of no use. De Crespigny refused to see either the eagerness of his own sex or the vexation of the other. He had engaged the steam launch and organized the picnic for this reason only, and he was determined not to be baulked of his purpose. He kept his place pertinaciously by Muriel's side, encouraging her to

ask him questions, and when she had learned all she could with regard to the Thames, and the different buildings they had passed on their way, she became curious to hear something about the company.

"Do tell me, Colonel de Crespigny," she whispered, "all about your friends. I want to know their names, and if they are nice or nasty. I like to hear you talk."

"You little tyrant," he replied laughing, "I might as well have brought Debrett in my pocket with the pages turned down. About whom is your ladyship so curious?"

"Everybody. But I will begin with that pale lady at the further end of the launch. She is dressed in green, and has a boy by her side. She has been looking at me so hard, I think she must know who I am."

Colonel de Crespigny glanced indifferently to the spot where Mrs. Lorrimer stood with her son, burning with indignation that had no power to call one tinge of colour into her

cheek. It was characteristic of the man that he should have invited this woman to witness the triumph of his infidelity to herself, but he would have been astonished if any one had told him that by so doing he had committed an act of cruelty. He was so blissfully blind to everything, except what ministered to his own vanity, that he would have replied that if Caroline Lorrimer cared for him, she ought to rejoice at what gave him pleasure. As it was, he smiled as he caught her eye, as much as to say, "See how I am enjoying myself, and I hope you are doing the same." And then he returned eagerly to Lady Muriel, and said :

"I should be very much surprised to find that any one on board the boat was ignorant by this time of your identity. Do you suppose they would not be curious to learn the name of the *belle* of the picnic? But the lady you have pointed out happens to be a very old friend of mine, and she would

esteem it a great honour to know you. May I introduce her to you?"

Of course Lady Muriel bowed and acquiesced, and in another moment Mrs. Lorrimer was standing before her. She would not refuse the introduction that de Crespigny had offered her, for she had decided that *if this thing must be*, she would force herself (for Arthur's sake) to put the best face upon it that she could. But her *complaisance* was all assumed, and under the somewhat constrained smile with which she greeted her beautiful young rival, there lurked a deadly and bitter hatred, that made her long to kill her on the spot. She would have gladly enacted the part of Queen Eleanor, and handed her supplanter a cup of poison that should quench her hopes for ever. But these days are not the days for the dagger or the bowl. They would be less guilty, perhaps, if they were. These are the days for smiling faces, and revengeful

hearts—for outstretched hands, and lying lips—  
—for flattering compliments, and an envious,  
malicious, and uncharitable spirit.

Mrs. Lorrimer proffered her gloved hand  
for Muriel's acceptance, and murmured some-  
thing about the pleasure of making her  
acquaintance, but under her apparent friend-  
liness the girl seemed to detect the cloven  
foot, and shrunk involuntarily from her.

"You have not been long home from  
abroad, I believe?" she commenced, with a  
frigid smile. "I think my friend Colonel  
de Crespigny told me as much."

"Quite long enough to have forgotten all  
about it," laughed Muriel, drawing a little  
closer to the colonel for protection.

"Oh, indeed! Perhaps I have made a  
mistake. But I believe this is your first in-  
troduction to our beautiful river."

"Yes, you are right there, but I hope it  
will not be the last. I was just telling  
Colonel de Crespigny that he may bring me

here as often as he pleases. I think it is the most charming sight I have ever seen."

"Don't give me too much license, Lady Muriel," replied the colonel, "or I may take you at your word, and re-engage the launch for to-morrow. What is the matter, Mrs. Lorrimer? Are you not well?"

"Quite well, thank you. I was only thinking that poor Arthur does not seem to be enjoying himself much. He is all alone."

"You shouldn't have brought him. Boys are out of place in a party like this. He would have been happier left on the banks, fishing for minnows with a crooked pin. But I must find a better cavalier for you, Mrs. Lorrimer. Let me introduce Captain Ralston to you."

"No, thank you. I prefer to go back to my boy," she answered coldly, as with another bow to Lady Muriel she rejoined young Arthur.

"I don't think she is very nice, but I

am afraid you have offended her," said Lady Muriel mischievously, as Caroline Lorrimer left them.

De Crespigny shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not my fault," he said, "if ladies will be touchy."

"But perhaps she thinks you ought to go and talk with her a little now, as you are such old friends," suggested the girl.

"And what if I prefer my new friend to any old one," he answered, looking full into her blushing face. "Am I to be condemned to banishment for Mrs. Lorrimer's sake—and on my birthday too?"

"I wish I had known it was your birthday, colonel. I would have brought you a present."

"There is only one present I should care to accept from you, Lady Muriel."

"Really! And what is it? Don't be extravagant in your choice. Remember I am very poor."

"But it is something of the utmost value."

"Then you mustn't come to me for it, colonel. Cissy will be more likely to be able to get it for you. Oh! What *is* the matter with Cousin Amelia?"

Miss Rutherford, who had been trying in vain, ever since they started, to attract some notice from Colonel de Crespiigny, was so overcome by her failure and the sight of his devotion to Lady Muriel, that she thought she would try fainting as a resource to bring him to her side. Faintness is an elegant and refined sort of illness, which need not affect the appearance of the invalid, except by an interesting pallor, and just sufficiently clouds her intellect to allow her to confess her weakness as she is slowly returning to consciousness. Therefore, fainting (real or assumed) has always been in vogue amongst ladies who can think of no better way to appeal to the hearts of the male sex, and Miss Rutherford (who was

really fretting enough to make herself ill) considered the opportunity a good one to show Colonel de Crespigny the tender materials of which she was made. So what with the heat of the day and her disappointment and a little acting she managed to give a very good imitation of a swoon, which brought Lady Muriel and the colonel and most of the picnic party to her assistance. Lina Walford seemed excessively annoyed at the occurrence.

“What nonsense!” she exclaimed, as she shook her aunt with anything but a tender touch. “Here, auntie! Do rouse yourself and come into the cabin. You can stand perfectly well if you try. I wouldn’t make a fuss like this in public, for all the world.”

“But, Lina, if she is really ill, she can’t help it,” interposed Muriel; “I suppose it’s the heat. Can’t we get some water?”

“Of course, I will fetch it for you,” cried the colonel.

"Fiddlesticks, Muriel," whispered Lina, "can't you see it's fudge? It's only ill-temper, because the colonel has not paid her any attention to-day. It's sickening to see such conduct in an old woman."

"Hush," said Muriel, who was afraid her cousin might overhear the words. At this moment Colonel de Crespigny returned with a glass of water.

"Raise her head and try and make her drink it," he said.

"Better throw it right over her at once," suggested Lina, "the shock will recover her."

But at that moment, Miss Rutherford slightly moved her head, and with a deep sigh murmured "*Arthur!*"

"What did she say?" asked a bystander.

"She asked for her maid Martha," replied Lina with ready mendacity; "she is all right now she has spoken. Come, auntie, you must let me take you down into the cabin. I can't have you stay here any longer."

And with determined authority, Lina shook Miss Rutherford up, and dragged, rather than led her, to the tiny saloon cabin. There the poor lady, overcome by the failure of her little artifice, laid her head down on her niece's shoulder and burst into a flood of tears.

"Oh, don't be so ridiculous, auntie," cried Miss Walford in a tone of vexation. "You are making a perfect exhibition of yourself, and your tears will ruin my ribbons. I really can't afford it. You must sit up straight. It's horribly selfish of you. You know I have my own little game to play, and you are taking all the wind out of my sails, crushing me up like that. Do try and remember where we are."

"Oh! Lina! I *do* remember it," wailed Miss Rutherford, "but it has been such a blow to me. He gave this party entirely on my account, and yet I have hardly seen anything of him all day."

"Look here, auntie, you had much better face the truth at once. Colonel de Crespigny didn't give this party for you at all, nor for me, nor for any one but Muriel Damer. He's been in love with her ever since we were in Paris—I saw it plain enough, if you didn't—and he has no intentions in any other quarter. So don't go and give yourself away in this ridiculous manner, for Heaven's sake!"

"But I don't believe what you say," cried Miss Rutherford. "The colonel paid me attention long before he ever saw that chit Muriel, and I shall not give up hope of winning him, as long as he is to be won."

"How is Miss Rutherford now?" asked de Crespigny himself, putting his head in at the cabin door. "Ah! better, I am glad to see. I have just been speaking to our captain, and he says he can put you ashore wherever you like to land, if you feel too ill to proceed and would prefer to return home."

“*To return home?*” repeated Miss Rutherford indignantly. “If I do, I shall take my niece and cousins with me. You seem to forget I am their *chaperon*.”

“I have provided against *that*,” he said with a smile. “My friend Mrs. Lorrimer will relieve you of the charge if you should feel it is beyond your strength.”

“*No!*” replied Miss Rutherford emphatically, “I know too well the responsibility I have undertaken, and Lord Rhyton would never forgive me if I were to leave his daughter and Miss Seton behind. I shall therefore go on as far as Maidenhead, Colonel de Crespigny, and I hope—I *hope* I may have no return of my illness.”

“Take some brandy-and-water. It’s the best thing out,” replied de Crespigny unsympathetically, as he returned to the side of Lady Muriel.

“Now, auntie, don’t be so foolish as to spoil your day for a chimera,” said Lina.

“ You’ll never get that man, so you had better put the idea out of your head at once. Go on my tack and look out for another. You know my little Greenham succeeded Captain Pattison, after twelve hours’ interval only, and look how nicely we are getting on. He wanted to kiss me just now, but I told him he must wait till we got to Maidenhead. Here, just puff yourself a bit, and comb out your curls, and you’ll be all right again—for I can’t stay here any longer.”

And having forced her aunt to return to the deck, and assure her friends that she was quite recovered, the conversation once more became general and the pleasure-party went on as before. As soon as they reached Maidenhead, they landed and went to the hotel, where a *recherché* dinner was in readiness for them. Lady Muriel sat by the host’s side at the head of the table, and though she ate and drank but little, she laughed and talked incessantly and became quite in-

toxicated with flattery and excitement. She could see plainly how each member of the party envied her position, and was inclined to be sulky on account of it—how the men wished they were Colonel de Crespigny, and the women that they were herself—and yet how one and all tacitly yielded the place of honour to her, as if it were her right. The adulation thus afforded to her beauty and the preference of her host, to say nothing of the undisguised compliments which de Crespigny kept pouring into her ear, made Lady Muriel feel almost beside herself. She forgot everything but the enchanted scene before her, and if a thought of Athol Ferguson had intruded itself, she would have dismissed it with a frown, so poor and simple did his boyish protestations of love appear, by comparison with the colonel's warm and impassioned speeches.

When the dinner was concluded, and the picnic party once more embarked on board

the steam launch, the August sun had sunk to rest and the tender shades of evening were settling on all around, turning the greens to greys and the greys to sombre brown. The river looked like a broad sheet of silver, shimmering beneath the rays of the moon, and the heat of the day had been succeeded by a light breeze, that made little ripples on the surface of the water, and lifted the ribbons that adorned Lady Muriel's hat. Colonel de Crespigny had secured her a seat on the poop of the little vessel, and kept one for himself by her side; and as they steamed homeward, well sheltered with plaids and shawls, his hand stole into hers beneath the coverings, whilst he tried to enlist her pity by a recital of the loves of his wasted life. This was a favourite theme of Arthur de Crespigny, when he wished to secure a woman's interest, and one which he had never known to fail. The female sex is (as a rule) so rich in compassion for lost oppor-

tunities and unrequited sensibility. It had had great effect during the lifetime of his late wife ; it was so sad to think that the handsome manly creature was neither loved nor looked after, and bore all his domestic worries into the bargain with so resigned an air. And now that she was dead it made a still more interesting retrospect, for the hearer could always cherish the hope of becoming his consoler. Muriel was very young and unsophisticated, and the story was new to her. It was indeed sad to think that he had suffered so much from want of sympathy and affection in the days gone by, and when the colonel saw the time was ripe for action and ventured to ask her if she thought she could possibly care for a man who was so much older than herself, but whose heart was as fresh as that of a boy of one-and-twenty, she squeezed his big hand with her little one under the plaid, and actually whispered “*Yes,*” without one thought of the princely fortune she had

so often heard discussed. This was the effect of an eloquence which owed its perfection to long and constant practice, but which sounded to her as if it came fresh bubbling from the depths of the colonel's heart. As he received her answer, de Crespigny bent his mouth to her ear, and said in a trembling voice, "I cannot thank you here, my darling, it is impossible; but, thank God, I shall have my whole life in which to thank you. Only I must tell you how happy you have made me, and how much I shall try to requite your goodness. You are my very own now, Muriel, remember, and I shall never give you up again to anybody."

He spoke in an eager agitated manner which a young girl might naturally mistake for the emotion of love, but which an older woman could have told her was the usual effect of passion. Colonel de Crespigny would have spoken in the same way, though not in the same words, to a barmaid who had

encouraged his attentions. He had spoken in that way dozens of times to poor Caroline Lorrimer, who sat at a little distance from him now, wondering what her old love was saying to his new fancy. But Muriel only thought that the idea of possessing her affection had opened an unknown world of happiness before him, and felt proud that she had the power to heal a life-long wound.

She continued to sit by his side in the moonlight as they steamed rapidly up the river, with her hand clasped in his, listening to the passionate bathos he poured into her ear, and the vivid description he gave her of the luxurious life she should enjoy.

“There is not a place on the earth where you may wish to dwell, my darling, that I will not take up my residence in, whether you choose Paris or London, Italy, Germany or America. Everything I possess will be at your disposal, and I shall be your very humble slave. Only I should prefer my

queen to keep up the state that befits her in London, and reign in society like one."

"And that is the very thing your queen would choose for herself," returned Muriel with a low laugh. "I have had enough of the country to last a lifetime, and feel as I should never tire of the town."

"We shall suit each other down to the ground," replied de Crespigny, "and I am the happiest man in all the world. I wish I could take you back to Oakley Court this evening, and inform Lord Rhylton of my good fortune; but I'm afraid it will be too late. I will go down there early to-morrow, however, and you can do as you choose, my darling, about telling your father of what has passed between us. And meanwhile, you must wear this ring as a token that you have pledged your word to become my wife."

Under cover still of the friendly plaids, de Crespigny slipped a magnificent diamond

ring off his own hand on to Lady Muriel's engaged finger—that finger which had not yet lost the impress of poor Athol Fergusson's paltry hoop of gold. It might have struck a more experienced woman as curious that the colonel should be so conveniently wearing a lady's brand-new ring on his little finger; but Lady Muriel never guessed that he had been so certain of his prize as to buy the jewel in anticipation of her wearing it. She twisted the ring round and round her slender finger with the utmost satisfaction, loving to feel the large diamonds of which it was composed, whilst her *fiancé* whispered that it was but a forerunner of all the beautiful things he meant to give her. They were not far from their place of disembarkation then, where waggonettes were waiting to convey the party to the station, whence they took the train for London.

Everybody was pretty well tired out by that time and anxious to get home again,

only Lady Muriel Damer's eyes shone dangerously bright, and her cheeks looked feverishly crimson. Her excited appearance and Colonel de Crespigny's looks of devotion, divulged their secret to the rest, and as soon as they found themselves in the railway carriage Lina Walford put the question point blank to her :

" Well, Muriel," she whispered, " and is it *un fait accompli* ? "

" Oh, yes," replied her friend nervously ; " we are engaged, Lina. See, here is my ring."

" Very handsome," said the young woman of the world, examining it, " and, like the Bible, tells of better things beyond. You've managed it very neatly, my dear. I didn't give you credit for half so much cleverness," and then, to Lady Muriel's consternation, she turned to Colonel de Crespigny (who was the only person in the carriage beside their own party) and said, " Muriel has confided

the great secret to me, colonel, and I congratulate you. I wish I had pulled off my own little affair at the same time, but I regret to say it is *in statu quo.*"

"*What secret?*" demanded Miss Rutherford, raising herself from semi-slumber.

"Muriel and Colonel de Crespigny are engaged, auntie. Wasn't I a true prophet? I told you it would come off to-day."

"You knew more, then, than *I* did," replied de Crespigny laughing. "I feared I was too presumptuous even to allude to it, but Lady Muriel was good enough to forgive me."

Muriel was looking down and blushing. She was not used yet to hearing her engagement mentioned in public, while Cecil Seton was clinging to her other side and telling her a thousand times how much she congratulated her.

"Everything will be right, my dear," she said with a significant squeeze of her sister's arm.

Miss Rutherford did not know what to say. She tried to wish them joy, but the words died upon her lips. Poor soul! It was about her twentieth disappointment, and she had not much time to repair her error. And when at last she spoke, it was to say in a very frigid voice, which she tried hard to steady :

“I think we should postpone our congratulations until we hear if my cousin Rhylton gives his consent to the engagement or not.”

“I am happy to tell you, Miss Rutherford, that his lordship has already expressed his willingness to give me Muriel,” interposed the colonel eagerly, “and so I have no uneasiness on that score.”

“Oh, well, if that is the case, there is nothing more to be said about it,” she returned in a low voice.

“Don’t you think so? In *my* idea there will be nothing else to be talked about for

the next month. But here is Paddington. I think you said, Muriel, that the carriage was to meet you at the station?"

"Yes; Lady Rhylton said she would send it all the way, as she did not like Cecil and me to travel by train so late at night. Good-bye to you all; we have had a most charming day. And I am to tell papa, Colonel de Crespigny, that he will see you to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes; to-morrow at about dinner time," replied de Crespigny as he leant on the carriage door and looked his *adieux*. He would fain have taken a more tender one of her, but the influence of the river scene had already faded, and Lady Muriel had become shy of his endearments. So he was obliged to content himself with a pressure of her hand, and return to his duty of seeing Miss Rutherford and her niece safely into their vehicle. The Oakley Court carriage with its splendid appointments rolled

off towards Richmond, and two tired girls in crumpled blue cambrics leaned back on the cushions and talked to each other.

“Oh, Muriel darling, I am so very glad, all but except for one thing; and that is, that we shall be separated again.”

“*Never*, Cissy! Why should you think so for a moment? What is the use of my being so rich, if I cannot see whom I choose?”

“But husbands are sometimes disagreeable, you know, and make their wives do as they tell them.”

“Colonel de Crespigny won’t. He has promised me I shall always have my own way in everything. Oh, Cissy, I am so glad he is rich. Nothing would have induced me to have him without.”

“But he is very nice into the bargain, and good-looking too.”

“Yes, very. He is everything that is delightful, and he is going to settle a lot

of money on me for my own use. What would the Grants say?"

But that question was never answered, even in Lady Muriel's own mind; for the allusion to her old friends brought a quick sigh with it that set her thoughts rambling in quite another direction.

Meanwhile Miss Rutherford was falling from one fit of hysterics into another, whilst Lina Walford (not *too* good-tempered after the failure of her own plans) was alternately ridiculing and scolding her unfortunate relative for making such a fool of herself.

And Caroline Lorrimer, in her lonely bed-chamber, was chewing the cud of bitterness as she reviewed the triumph of her young rival, and recognized how completely she, herself, had lost all power over the man who once declared that he loved her.

But Arthur de Crespigny slept well and soundly. He was not young enough to let love keep him waking. He was too well

used to that sort of thing to grow excited over it when the object of his passion was not in view. He did not know what it was to pine in absence, though he might long for a renewal of pleasure. He had, in fact, but little brain to keep him from his sleep: so his great animal nature slumbered composedly, without even a dream to ruffle it, and without a spark of pity for Amelia Rutherford's disappointment or Caroline Lorimer's tears.



## CHAPTER III.

“ GOOD-BYE, ATHOL ! ”

WHEN Athol Fergusson received the letter from Lord Rhylton inclosing Lady Muriel's note of dismissal, his first feeling was that of despair ; his second, of incredulity. He could not and would not believe that she had written it of her own free will. What ! Muriel, who had walked for so many evenings with him on the Ramparts of Revranches, with her hand clasped in his and her eyes speaking volumes of love in answer to his own ? Muriel, who had declared, times out of mind, that she loved him better than any one or any thing in the wide world, and had promised to wait for years until she could become his wife, or else never to marry any one at all ? It was

*impossible* that his loving, faithful Muriel could have penned those cruel words except under circumstances of the most exceptional cruelty. They had coerced his poor darling —they had frightened her into doing as they wished, and she was doubtless breaking her heart to think that her lover would accept their *dictum*. But he was determined not to do so. He resolved that he would take his final answer from Muriel's lips alone. He was only a subaltern, it was true, but he was an officer and a gentleman, and his overtures were at least entitled to respect. He would go down to Oakley Court and see Lord Rhylton on the subject himself. No thought of fear entered his mind as he made the resolution.

Athol Fergusson (though young) was made of the stuff that fears no man, and if the earl chose to regard his hopes as presumptuous, he could not, at least, say that they were wrong. So, as soon as he could obtain leave

(which happened to be the day after the picnic) he made his way down to Oakley Court, and arrived there purposely at about twelve o'clock, in order to make sure of finding Lord Rhyton at home. His heart was very heavy as he journeyed thither, and the future looked very black before him. He had but one hope of ever calling Muriel his wife, and that was founded on the faith he had in her fidelity. It was a melancholy prospect for both of them, long years of waiting for a happiness that might never come, and perhaps it was his duty to release his darling from any formal promises; but she should at least know that he held himself bound, and that whenever she wanted to go to him, he would be ready to receive her. So strong was his faith in their mutual affection, notwithstanding the blow that cruel note had given it. He reached Oakley Court about noon, and was shown into a cheerful and commodious ante-chamber, until his lord-

ship's pleasure concerning him was known. The earl was in his own study, conning the morning papers, and when Athol Fergusson's card was put into his hand, and he was told that the gentleman was waiting to see him in another room, he felt, and looked, considerably discomposed. Who *was* this pushing and presuming puppy who refused to take an answer written in plain English, but forced his way into the privacy of the Court to demand a reason for his rejection? However, the earl had an excellent answer ready for him. He had not seen his daughter since her return from the picnic, but he had just received a hastily penned letter from Colonel de Crespigny, posted the night before, in which he informed the earl of his success with Lady Muriel, and called on him to sanction the engagement which he had promised to approve. Lord Rhyton decided therefore that he would see this presumptuous subaltern, and give him his answer

*viva voce*, and told his footman to inform Mr. Athol Fergusson that Lord Rhyton was busily engaged at that moment, but that if he would wait a few minutes he would have the pleasure of seeing him. And then he rung the bell for Fielding and ordered her to tell Lady Muriel that he desired her presence in his study. Lady Muriel and Cecil Seton were having a merry time of it together when the earl's message reached them. They had lain in bed till past ten o'clock, in order to recover their fatigues of the day before, and having made hasty *toilettes*, had had breakfast served in Lady Muriel's rose-covered dressing-room. There they sat, in their white morning wrappers, with their long hair hanging down their backs, drinking chocolate and eating buttered toast, whilst they discussed the events of the picnic, and laughed heartily at everything that had appeared ridiculous or strange to them. Lady Muriel, especially, seemed to be

in the highest spirits. The first thing that had attracted her on waking had been the flashing of the brilliants on her finger, which had brought all kinds of pleasant thoughts of money, and jewels, and carriages, and horses in their train, and renewed the excitement of the day before.

“What shall I do about it, Cissy?” she asked. “Shall I tell papa myself, or leave Colonel de Crespigny to do so?”

“Oh! tell him yourself, Muriel. It isn’t as if there was any doubt of his being pleased at it. Didn’t he tell you that the colonel was a good match for any girl in the county?”

“Yes! he did, and he knew that he admired me into the bargain. Oh! how funny it will be to be married.”

“You don’t look much like a married lady now, Muriel; wearing your hair down your back takes three or four years off your age.”

“I must pile it all up on the top of my

head, and try and look as old as the colonel. I believe he's the same age as papa.”

“He doesn't look it—and surely, Muriel, you would not have him younger. Boys are so stupid and insipid.”

“I know they are,” replied Lady Muriel. “They can't talk of the same things as men.”

And indeed, a middle-aged man like Colonel de Crespigny, who has seen everything and done everything, can soon throw the conversation of an innocent-minded and ingenuous boy into the shade. The boy has not acquired the man's ready tongue, and want of bashfulness, and disregard of truth; but the man will never regain the boy's modesty, and candour, and shrinking from wrong. Colonel de Crespigny's effrontery was calculated to make the remembrance of Athol Fergusson's timid avowal of love seem poor and insipid by comparison, and he had intended it should do so. He had not entirely forgotten the lover of Revranches, and many

of his speeches had been expressly made with the view of causing the absent Athol to appear in his worst light, although he was not so foolish as to let Lady Muriel guess what he was driving at. And he had succeeded in leaving an impression on her mind that resulted in the above-given sentiment.

At that moment Fielding entered the room.

"If you please, your ladyship," she said, "his lordship desires you will go down to him in the study."

"Papa wants me," cried Lady Muriel springing up, "and I am not dressed! What shall I do?"

"Oh, Muriel! you are quite nice enough to go downstairs. You look lovely with your hair down. Let Fielding tie a blue ribbon round your waist, and you'll be all right."

"But suppose there should be some one with him," said Muriel, holding back.

“ His lordship is quite alone,” said the oracle, Fielding.

At that assertion, Muriel was persuaded to do as her sister wished her, and in another minute had run down to the study.

“ Papa,” she said, kissing him, “ what is it that you want of me ? ”

“ Several things, my dear. In the first place I must congratulate you, Muriel, on having made a brilliant conquest. I have received a letter from de Crespigny, in which he says you have engaged yourself to marry him. Is that correct ? ”

“ Quite, papa. Colonel de Crespigny proposed to me as we were returning home last night, and as you said he was such a good match, I accepted him. He gave me this ring,” continued Muriel, holding out her finger.

“ Ah ! very handsome indeed,” said the earl, peering at it through his spectacles, “ but nothing, I expect, to what you *will*

have. You're a very lucky girl, Muriel. You have landed the biggest fish of the season, and I hope you are aware of your advantages."

"Oh, yes, papa! I know how rich he is, and he is coming to the Court to-day to talk to you about it, and to tell you the sum of money he is prepared to settle on me. He said I was to tell you so."

"He will make you a liberal settlement. I am sure of that, and you have made a noble establishment in life for yourself. This is better than going back to Revranches, eh, Muriel?"

"*Much* better, papa," she answered fervently.

"And now, my dear, I have another matter to speak to you about. It appears that I made a mistake the other day, when I told you that Mr. Fergusson was on his way to his destination. How I came to misunderstand him I cannot say, but I did,

and it seems that he has not yet started, and instead of accepting your note and mine as a final rejection of his suit, he has had the impudence to force his way into Oakley Court for an explanation of our decision. At least, that is I presume the reason of his appearance here.”

At this Lady Muriel turned deadly pale.

“Athol is *here*—in this house?” she ejaculated.

“Yes! His card was brought to me about ten minutes ago, and he is waiting to see me in the ante-chamber. Had I not received this very satisfactory letter from de Crespigny, announcing your engagement to him, I should have simply dismissed the young man and said nothing to you about it; but under the circumstances I think it best that you should see him yourself and tell him you are engaged to marry another man.”

"*I—I* see him and tell him?" cried Muriel with trembling lips. "Oh, no, papa, I cannot—*indeed* I cannot! Go and tell him anything you like yourself, and let me go back to my room till he is gone."

She would have made her escape at that moment, had not the earl detained her.

"No! Muriel. I will not allow you to shirk your duty in this way. This young man is evidently both bold and pertinacious. He refuses to take your written word that you desire the engagement broken off, but pursues you into the privacy of your home, with the idea, I suppose, that he will make you retract your decision. Now this is a sort of thing that must be cut short at once and for ever, or he may worry you again and again. Come with me and give him his answer. It will not take five minutes, and then it will be over and done with."

And he took her firmly by the arm as he spoke.

“I cannot—I *cannot*,” exclaimed Muriel, trying to wrench herself away.

“And I *insist* upon it,” replied Lord Rhylton angrily. “What do you mean by this behaviour? Do you wish Colonel de Crespigny to hear of this scene, and break off his engagement with you? If it results in that, remember, there will be nothing left for you but Revranches.”

“But, papa, could you not tell him better than myself? It is hard for me, you know. It seems so cruel—because—because—he cares for me.”

Her voice was breaking now, and the earl saw that another minute would see her in tears.

“Go to him, then,” he said roughly, “and tell him you love him, and then come back and pack up your boxes for Revranches.”

“Oh, no! no!” she cried out in agony. “Father, you will *never* send me there again!”

"I *will*, unless you come with me now. I swear it."

He wouldn't have done any such thing, but Lady Muriel believed him, and allowed him to half lead, half drag her to the antechamber. A footman waiting in the corridor opened the door for them and closed it again, and the Earl of Rhyton and his daughter were alone with Athol Fergusson.

He was sitting in an arm-chair, looking out upon the park, and feeling more and more despondent as the minutes went on, and the earl's delay in giving him an audience seemed to augur poorly for his chances of success. As the door opened he rose from his seat and prepared to address the new-comer, but when he saw that Lady Muriel—in her white dress and blue ribbons, with her fair hair hanging down her back, looking much as she did at Revranches, although so deadly pale—was leaning on her father's arm, his speech forsook him,

and all his feeling rushed into his face instead.

“*Muriel!*” he uttered, under his breath, but she took no further notice of his appeal, except what was conveyed by her sad, frightened eyes.

“Mr. Athol Fergusson, I believe?” commenced the earl, and Athol bowed in acknowledgment of his name.

“A few days ago, Mr. Fergusson, I sent you a note inclosing one from Lady Muriel Damer. I conclude you have not received it?”

“On the contrary, it is on account of that note, my lord, that I am here.”

“I am very much surprised to hear it. I thought both my daughter’s letter and my own were final.”

“Not to me, my lord. I have too much at stake in that decision. I cannot help thinking that Lady Muriel wrote that note against her own free will, and I cannot leave England without being assured of the truth.”

“ You do not place much restraint on your tongue, sir, when you accuse me of coercing my daughter’s inclinations in this matter,” replied the earl, frowning ; “ but since you doubt our written words, perhaps you will believe our spoken ones, and if they are such as to hurt your feelings, you must remember that you have only yourself to thank for it. I consider it is the height of im—im—imprudence,” continued Lord Rhylton (substituting a milder term for his first intention), “ for you to have forced your way into Oakley Court.”

“ I am sorry to hear your lordship speak of my visit in so objectionable a manner,” said young Fergusson, flushing darkly with suppressed anger, “ but I have yet to learn that one gentleman may not call upon another.”

“ When he is invited, sir, not otherwise,” returned the earl ; “ and especially when he has received a written intimation that his presence is not desired.”

“Then I will relieve you of it as quickly as possible,” exclaimed Athol as he seized his hat; “but I thought (when you knew how deeply my feelings are concerned in this matter) you would have had sufficient humanity to excuse an apparent intrusion. But I *must* speak to your daughter before I go. Muriel! tell me the truth, and put me out of this awful suspense. Do you *really* wish our engagement to be at an end?”

He advanced towards her as he spoke, and she felt the fire of his dark blue eyes burning upon her own. She could not meet his gaze, but, trembling and pale, turned her white face towards her father.

“Oh, papa! *you* tell him! What can I say?”

“Tell Mr. Fergusson the truth, my dear, as he desires you to do. It is a sufficient answer to his question.”

Then she turned her scared eyes upon

Athol, but the sight of the handsome young face she had thought she loved so well broke her down.

“Oh, Athol! oh, papa! I cannot, *cannot* say it!”

“What is it that you cannot say, Muriel?” asked the young man in a low, passionate tone. “Not that you do not love me! That is *impossible* after the long time that we have been promised to each other. But perhaps the prospect of waiting so many years for me frightens you, and you think that I shall not remain true to you. Then I will release you, darling, as far as you are concerned, but *I* can never be released myself. *I love you, Muriel*, and I shall love you to my life’s end, and, if need be, I will wait and hope for years until I can call you my wife. Only say once more that you love me, before I go.”

“Stop, sir, stop!” interposed Lord Rhylton authoritatively. “I cannot allow this farrago

of nonsense to proceed any longer. You are reckoning without your host. Lady Muriel's hand is already promised to another suitor. She is engaged to be married to Colonel de Crespigny.”

Athol Fergusson sprang backwards, as if he had received a blow in the face.

“*Engaged!*” he repeated in a dazed voice. “Engaged! It is impossible. She is engaged *to me!*”

“Engaged to you, sir! How dare you talk of a young lady being engaged to you without her father's consent? It is a folly, an absurdity, and the last thing in the world I should have permitted her to do! For a beggar, your presumption exceeds all bounds.”

Athol drew himself up proudly.

“I may be a beggar, my lord, according to *your* definition of the word, but I am too much of a gentleman to insult any man who comes to me with an honest purpose, however foolish his hopes may be.”

"Papa, papa! don't speak to him like that! *He loves me!*" cried Lady Muriel, hiding her face upon her father's shoulder.

"Yes, Muriel," said Athol gravely, "I love you, and you will do me the justice to say that I loved you long before you came into all this state and grandeur, and when I had a right to suppose that the man who kept his daughter in actual poverty would not object to her becoming the wife of an English officer. Everything is changed between us now, though, except my heart, and it is not my fault that that is faithful still. Put me out of my pain at once, then, and tell me if Lord Rhyton speaks the truth when he says you are engaged to marry another man."

She bowed her head as if unable to reply.

"*Speak,*" cried Athol fiercely. "I will accept the truth from your lips only. If you were brave enough to do this thing

you can be brave enough to acknowledge it. I will not be put off with dumb show.”

“Speak, my dear,” added the earl encouragingly.

“It is true,” she said, lifting her white face for a moment to her lover’s. “Papa said that we could never marry, and he would send me back to Revranches, and——”

“Oh, spare me your excuses,” exclaimed Athol Fergusson bitterly. “It is enough that you have done it, without saying *why* it was done. You have perjured yourself, Muriel—you are false. You have broken my heart and destroyed all my faith in women. Let that be sufficient, and don’t soil your tongue with fabrications of the ‘why and the wherefore.’ You have cast me off, and I leave you. But the day of retribution will come.”

“Mr. Fergusson, I will not allow you to address Lady Muriel Damer in this strain any longer. You have received your an-

swer, and you must go!" said the earl, ringing the bell.

"I obey you, my lord," replied Athol preparing to take his leave. "Good-bye, Muriel, *for ever*."

She was about to speak when the footman appeared at the door, and her lover passed through it and was gone. Then she screamed and would have rushed after him.

"Good-bye! Oh! Athol, darling, good-bye," she exclaimed hysterically, but her father clapped his hand over her mouth.

"Are you *mad*?" he said. "Do you wish the whole house to know of your folly? Muriel, I am ashamed of you. Try and be more practical. These things are always painful, but none the less necessary for that. Now! *do* try and compose yourself."

For Lady Muriel had flung herself on the sofa and was weeping bitterly.

"This would be a nice thing for de Crespigny to hear of," exclaimed the earl petulantly, as

he paced backwards and forwards, “and such matters have a wonderful faculty of travelling. Why, he would break off his engagement with you at once. Muriel! I beg of you to try and compose yourself. Go up to your room again and don’t come down till you are calm. I wouldn’t have Lady Rhyton see you in this state for all the world.”

“I will go,” replied Muriel, slowly rising and making her way towards the door. But as she reached it she turned round and asked in a quick, frightened manner :

“But, papa—if you supposed when you had Athol’s letter that he was on his way to India, how was it that he received your answer and came here in consequence?”

Her large eyes were searching him through and through, and Lord Rhyton’s gaze fell beneath them. He was detected in a subterfuge, and did not know how to extricate himself from the imputation.

"Well, my dear, I didn't know where to address my answer," he commenced lamely, "and so—and so——"

"You *deceived* me," said the girl indignantly. "You knew that I never would have written that letter had I thought he was in England. You hatched a plot against us, papa, and I will never forgive you."

And with these words she left the earl, utterly discomfited and unable to find any excuse for himself.



## CHAPTER IV.

### THE BETROTHED.

COLONEL DE CRESPIGNY did not wake a minute earlier than his usual time on the day after he became the accepted lover of Lady Muriel Damer. His huge body lay sunk in its downy bed till after eleven o'clock, for he was a man who hated rising, and would lie for hours, thinking of nothing, sooner than get up and shake off his drowsiness. Neither Love nor Duty had the power to rouse him, for he had a self-imposed duty to perform that day, before he could go down to Oakley Court, and that was to meet Agnes Prudhomme on her arrival from Revranches and take her on to Mrs. Lorrimer's. The girl was to reach London by the Antwerp boat, which was

due at eight o'clock in the morning, but that was altogether too soon for the comfort-loving Colonel de Crespigny. So he had directed Agnes to take a cab and drive at once to a private hotel in the Strand—the address of which he had given her—and where he had directed she should be shown every attention until he came to fetch her away. And having performed this munificent act of charity he considered he had a right to lie in bed as long as he chose. When noon struck, he rung for his valet and dawdled over his dressing until one, when he had his breakfast, and having swallowed a couple of brandies and sodas after it (for Colonel de Crespigny, though no drunkard, was a confirmed drinker, that is to say, though seldom tipsy, he systematically drank more than was good for his constitution), he stepped into his carriage and drove down to the Strand. The proprietors of the hotel to which he had

directed Agnes Prudhomme were well known to him, and his card was an “Open Sesame” in their establishment. This was not the first of the colonel’s *protégées* whom they had received without question, but de Crespiigny was a rich man and never looked at the items of their bills. They received him, therefore, with welcoming smiles and the information that the young lady had arrived safely, and was in No. 2 sitting-room, where in another moment the colonel had joined her.

“My dear child,” he exclaimed as he took her hand, “did you think I was never coming?”

Agnes, who had had time to rearrange her *toilette* and her hair, looked as pretty as ever, as she rose to greet him.

“*Mais non, monsieur!* I knew that you would keep your promise, but the time has seemed very long. But I am in *ce cher Londres* at last and with you, and I am quite content.”

She clasped both her hands over his, as she spoke, and fixed her great gipsy eyes upon him and looked so bewitching as she did so that the colonel was tempted to stoop down and impress one of his paternal kisses upon her forehead.

“And so you had a quick passage, my dear. And they have made you thoroughly at home here, and you do not find England so *triste* as your friends in Revranches would have made you believe. That is right. But how did you get your mother’s consent to your leaving her, at last?”

“I never did get it, *monsieur*. *Madame ma mère* was so selfish, she would have kept me at her side for ever. So as soon as I received the money you were so good as to send me, I packed up my box and said I was going to visit my cousins in Ghent, instead of which I went straight down to Antwerp and took the boat over here.”

“Bravo! my little Agnes,” exclaimed the

colonel, laughing heartily, “you’re the stuff that women are made of. And so you cheated them all at Revranches, did you? It will be a long time before you can venture to show your face there again.”

“I shall never go back there, *monsieur, never!*” replied Agnes emphatically, shaking her dark curls; “I knew it must be so when I came away.”

“Then you must be *my* care now, Agnes, and look upon me as your best friend,” said de Crespigny, squeezing the hand he held, “and if you should be in any difficulty, you must be sure to come to me to help you out of it. Mind, that is a bargain.”

“If *monsieur* will tell me where to find him,” said Agnes.

“I will give you the address of my chambers,” replied de Crespigny, producing a card, “but you must not come there, my dear, without first giving me notice.

Remember that. Else you might meet strangers, which will make it unpleasant for both of us. But now, if you are ready, I will drive you in my carriage to Mrs. Lorrimer's. My time is rather limited this afternoon, as I am engaged to go down and dine at Oakley Court."

"*Oakley Court*," repeated Agnes, with knitted brows. "Is not that the place where *Miladi* Muriel lives with her father? *Madame* Grant told me so."

"And she was right, Agnes," replied the colonel as they drove away; "it is Lord Rhylton's place, and I shall see Lady Muriel this evening."

"And has she a lady's maid?" demanded Agnes eagerly. "She might have taken me into her service. It would be better, I think, than this *Madame* Lorrimer's, for somehow I do not feel as if I should like her."

"Mrs. Lorrimer is a very nice lady, and I see no reason why you should not get on well

together. But you must not blame Lady Muriel. She had no choice. Her maid was chosen for her by Lady Rhyton. When she is her own mistress, and free to choose for herself, I will do my utmost to persuade her to take you into her service, and till then I hope you will try and make yourself happy."

"Is *Miladi* Muriel going to get married, then?" asked Agnes quickly.

De Crespigny considered for a moment before he answered her. He had no decided intentions towards this girl, and yet her *bizarre* beauty attracted him forcibly, and his self-love forbid his telling her anything that might lower the admiration she might feel for him. She would hear soon enough of his engagement to Lady Muriel. To-day, at least, there was no necessity to enlighten her. So he said, "You are too quick for me, my dear, and indeed you women always jump at conclusions. Is Lady Muriel going to be married? I should think there is little doubt

of it, for she is young and pretty—and you pretty women have a knack of playing the devil with us poor men till we don't know whether we are standing on our heads or our heels—but *when* it will come to pass is beyond my guessing. Only be patient for a little while, Agnes, and I think it very probable you may attain your wishes. But here we are at Mrs. Lorrimer's. Wait in the carriage for a minute till I have announced your arrival to her."

He jumped out as he spoke, and ran up the steps and into his friend's presence. Mrs. Lorrimer received him with a very solemn air. She was still suffering deeply from the events of the day before, and not disposed to give a cordial welcome to the author of her woes.

"Well, Carrie," exclaimed the colonel cheerfully as he entered the room, "I have brought you your little maid, and I hope you'll be a comfort to each other."

"Is she *another* of your victims?" demanded

Mrs. Lorrimer coldly as she refused his proffered embrace, and presented him with her hand instead.

“*Another of my victims,*” repeated de Crespiigny. “Good heavens, Carrie! what an extraordinary woman you are. Do you wish to insult me? I take the trouble to go and meet your servant and bring her to you and that is all the thanks I get for my pains. I must say you are not very grateful.”

“And what have I to be grateful for, Arthur? Do you suppose I believe you would take so much trouble on *my* account or the servant’s? I can guess she is young and pretty before I see her, or she might have found her way from the wharf to Bryanston Square without any assistance on your part.”

The colonel looked confused, and thought it best to cut the matter short.

“Well, look here, Carrie. Don’t let’s have any fuss about it, for heaven’s sake. You

said you wanted a lady's maid, and I have brought you one. I have made myself responsible also for any extra expense she may cause you, and if you don't get on well together I will find the girl another situation. But while she is with you treat her kindly, I beg, and don't make a scandal. She doesn't know of my engagement to Lady Muriel Damer, and I don't wish her to know it. Will you be kind enough, therefore, not to mention it before her? ”

“ Am I in the habit of making *confidantes* of my servants, Arthur? Though I don't understand what possible interest your engagement can have for this Belgian girl.”

“ None at all. That is why I don't wish her to be told of it,” he replied with his usual effrontery, as he ran down the steps again and told Agnes that her new mistress was ready to receive her.

“ And are you going away again? Shall I have to part with *Monsieur*? ” said the girl,

with dangerously bright eyes and *les larmes au voix*.

"Only for a little while, Agnes," he answered pressing her hand. "By George ! you're so handsome, I almost wish we hadn't to part at all. But send me a line to say if you will be able to get out for an hour or two next Sunday, and if so, come round to my chambers, and we'll have a chat together."

"I will come," answered the girl briefly as she entered the house.

Colonel de Crespigny followed her, but only remained long enough to introduce her to Mrs. Lorrimer, when he entered his carriage again and returned home to prepare himself for his visit to Oakley Court.

Things were not so bright there as they should have been on such an auspicious day, for Lady Rhyton was in a bad temper, and when that was the case all the household knew it. The actual cause of her ladyship's mood was a mystery. Is not the cause of

that greatest curse to domestic life—uncontrolled temper—generally a mystery, even to the person who indulges in it? The countess had wished to get rid of Lady Muriel Damer. She had also wished, and even encouraged the idea, of her marrying Colonel de Crespiigny, but yet when her daughter Cecil met her that morning, brimful of the news, Lady Rhylton turned on her like a fury, and reviled the poor girl for having missed such a chance for herself. The fact is, the countess had been somewhat chagrined at not being invited to the picnic. She was painfully aware that her *première jeunesse* had passed, and anything that reminded her of the unwelcome fact roused her ill temper, and Cecil was too proud of her sister's conquest, and dilated too largely on the universal admiration she excited, to please her mother.

“Mamma, you should have seen how *lovely* Muriel looked. All the other ladies—even Lina Walford—seemed dowdy beside her.

And I couldn't help laughing to myself to watch the disappointment of the gentlemen when Colonel de Crespigny monopolized her. They all wanted to sit next her at dinner. And she was so merry and cheerful, too. I don't wonder at it."

"Cecilia, you are a fool about that girl. Can't you see what a double-faced little hypocrite she is? She doesn't care two straws for her father, and yet she hung about him and kissed him as if he was the dearest creature in the world to her, just to get his consent to her going to this picnic."

"Oh! mamma, you have no right to say that," cried Cecil with honest indignation. "How can we tell how much, or how little, Muriel cares for Lord Rhylton? And I am sure he is very proud of her, and will be delighted to see her placed in her proper position in life."

"Oh! she has angled splendidly to catch Colonel de Crespigny, I allow *that*," re-

turned the countess sarcastically ; “ indeed, it has been a matter of wonderment to me where an innocent young girl fresh from a convent can have learnt to handle the matrimonial rod so skilfully. I fancy Lady Muriel must have had a little practice in Revranches before we had the honour of meeting her.”

“ Mamma ! you are most unjust and unkind to Muriel, and I cannot imagine the reason,” replied Miss Seton ; “ you have wanted to get rid of her ever since she came to Oakley Court, and now that she has secured a good match for herself, and is going to leave us, you abuse her for *that*. What *do* you want ? ”

“ A little less impertinence from *you* if you please, miss,” retorted her mother angrily. “ If you weren’t a fool as your father was before you, you would see this matter in the same light as I do. Lady Muriel has stood in your way ever since she came here.”

“Then you ought to rejoice that she will stand in it no longer.”

“But why didn’t you secure the prize for yourself, instead of letting her walk off with it before your eyes?”

Cecil stared.

“*I* secure Colonel de Crespigny? Why, mother, you must be mad! As if he, or any other man, would look at me while Muriel was by. Besides, I don’t like him, and I wouldn’t cross swords with her for him if I did.”

“And you couldn’t get him if you tried,” retorted Lady Rhyton with vulgar rage; “you’re too ugly, and too stupid for anything, and you’ll remain on my hands for life—a worry, and an obstacle and a stumbling-block.”

“Oh, mother! don’t be so cruel. I am no burden to you, and I will never stand in your way,” exclaimed Cecil bursting into tears.

“But you *do* stand in my way and always will do so. Do you suppose it is any credit to me to be known as your mother—you at twenty-five, and looking ten years older—plain, and dowdy, and uninteresting? I am ashamed of you wherever you appear.”

“Oh! mother, mother,” sobbed the girl with her face in her hands.

“Don’t ‘*mother*’ me. The word makes me sick. I wish to goodness you had died in your cradle, sooner than grown up to be such a disgrace to me. Now, it’s no use your whining there. If you’d had any consideration for me, you’d have got married long ago, and left me to live the rest of my life in peace. Your father gave me little enough of it whilst he was living.”

“Oh, how *could* I? How is it *my* fault?” cried Cecil rocking herself to and fro in the violence of her grief.

At that moment the door opened and Muriel appeared. She had resolutely dried

her tears, and removed all traces of the emotion called forth by her interview with Athol Fergusson. She was most anxious that her step-mother should hear nothing of the occurrence, for she dreaded her ridicule, and had not much faith in her keeping the secret to herself. So she had made a great effort to rally her spirits, and descended to the library as soon as ever she was dressed for luncheon, with the intention of herself announcing her engagement to Lady Rhylton. But the sight of Cecil Seton's tears drove every other thought out of her head.

"My dear Cissy," she exclaimed as she hastened to her, "what *is* the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing," answered Cecil between her sobs.

"It cannot be *nothing*," repeated Muriel somewhat indignantly (for that Lady Rhylton, in vulgar parlance, "bullied" her daughter was no secret to her). "Perhaps your

ladyship can inform me of the reason," she added, turning to her step-mother.

"And pray, what business is it of *yours*?" demanded the countess turning upon her in her anger; "perhaps you will remember, Lady Muriel, that you do not belong to our family, but are simply here, as it were, *on sufferance*, and that you have no right whatever to interfere between my daughter and myself."

Lady Muriel's blood was roused. She had often seen Lady Rhylton in a bad temper before, but this was the first time she had presumed to visit it upon her head, and the girl's new and important prospects invested her with extra dignity to resent an affront.

"I am perfectly aware, madam," she answered loftily, "that I do *not* belong to your family (whatever it may be) and also that you owe your present state and condition to your having been admitted to *ours*, and I think few people would hesi-

tate to decide *which* of us obtained the greater advantage from the alliance."

This allusion sent the countess into a regular fury.

"Advantage!" she screamed, "I should like to know what advantage *I* got by taking a set of paupers into Oakley Court. Why, the very clothes upon your back—the dresses in which you have angled for Colonel de Crespigny, and landed him—were paid for out of *my* money! and if you marry the man, you'll have to go to church in a gown of *my* providing, you ungrateful, impertinent minx."

Lady Muriel gasped with horror. She had known poverty, but it had never fallen to her lot before to be brought face to face with the ultra-vulgarism of wealth.

"For shame, mamma! for shame," cried Cecil Seton.

"Hush, Cissy! not a word. Don't get yourself into trouble for me," interposed

Lady Muriel ; “ I can bear what Lady Rhylton says because it is not true. I will never accept another present from her hands, and as soon as I am married, Colonel de Crespigny shall pay her back every pound she has laid out on me. I see now, how much better it is to be poor and well-bred—than rich and vulgar.”

“ You will not repeat a private conversation to Colonel de Crespigny, I trust,” said Lady Rhylton, alarmed for the consequences of her imprudence.

“ I promise nothing, madam, except to rid you of the burden of my support as soon as possible. My poor father has indeed bartered his birthright for a mess of pottage.”

“ I will stand this conduct no longer,” exclaimed the countess as she sailed towards the door ; “ and I shall inform the earl of every word that has passed between us. He is the last person, I am sure, to stand by quietly and hear his wife insulted.”

"Or his daughter," replied Muriel as Lady Rhylton slammed the door behind her.

"Oh, Muriel," said Cecil, "what shall we do? Mamma is so spiteful when she is angry. Supposing she sets your father against you?"

"It is of little consequence if she does. I shall soon be my own mistress and independent of both of them. But I cannot stand being insulted, even by your mother. Something has happened this morning, Cissy, that has greatly annoyed me. Papa has not been acting fairly towards me. He has treated me like a child, and for the moment, he made me almost hate him and all men into the bargain. I was more than half inclined to tell Colonel de Crespigny that I regretted my consent of yesterday, and that I would rather be free. But this interview has changed my opinion. I cannot live happily at Oakley Court after what

your mother has said. The very things I eat and drink will choke me. I must go away again, as soon as ever I can, and the colonel may fix the earliest day he chooses for our marriage. I am panting already to be gone."

"And oh, Muriel! my sister. What shall *I* do without you?" sobbed Cecil.

"I shall always be your sister, Cissy, and you shall come and live with me altogether if you like. But it must be right away from Oakley Court. I never felt so wounded or so proud in all my life before," said Lady Muriel, drawing herself up. "I know that we are poor, but to call us *paupers*—"

"It was wicked of her; it was a cruel shame," said Cecil, "but mamma does not know what she says when she is in a rage. Very likely she will kiss you and ask you to forget it, before dinner-time."

"But I will *never* forget it!" returned Muriel; "I *cannot* forget such horrid things.

And I will marry Colonel de Crespigny as soon as ever he asks me to do so."

She went out for a ride on horseback in the afternoon to try and shake off the unpleasant sensations that mastered her, but she returned home with the same swelling breast and upcurled lip to remind her she had been insulted. Colonel de Crespigny had already arrived, and was closeted with Lord Rhylton in his study, but as soon as he heard the sound of her horse's feet he appeared at the hall door to help her to dismount, and carried her off into the antechamber as if she were his own property. At any other moment Lady Muriel would have felt shy and nervous, but just now the paramount feeling in her heart was indignation at her wrongs, and she had poured out the whole story (told in her own excited way and graphic language) to the colonel before they had been ten minutes together.

De Crespigny was properly indignant. He knew the countess's temper, but had hoped she would have recognized the propriety of keeping the peace for the short time her step-daughter and she were to live together. He animadverted on her conduct in the strongest manner, and turned it to his own interest by entreating Lady Muriel to make the period of her stay in Oakley Court as brief as possible.

"You know how I am longing to have you all to myself, Muriel," he said, with his strong arms clasped round her, "and as you will experience no pain in quitting your home, what reason is there for delay?"

Lady Muriel hesitated. She was a frank and honourable woman, and the thought suddenly struck her—ought she to marry this man without letting him know that she had been fond of Athol Fergusson? So she lowered her eyes and answered half in a whisper :

“I don’t know, but I think I—I—ought to tell you something first, Colonel de Crespiigny.”

“Say, *Arthur*, my darling.”

“*Arthur*, then; only it sounds so strange from me to you. But perhaps you think that I have never been engaged before, and that you are the very first; but it is not true. I was fond of a young gentleman in Revranches, and we promised to marry each other——”

“And he had the presumption to follow you to Oakley Court this morning, and your father and you sent him about his business. Oh, yes! I have heard all about it, Muriel,” continued the colonel, laughing; “Lord Rhylton has just given me the whole story, and I am not at all afraid of my formidable rival, I can assure you that.”

Muriel did not join in the laugh.

“I am glad you have heard it,” she said simply; “it is right you should. Of course

we could never have married because he has no money, but I didn't think of that when I gave him my promise."

"And you won't think of it any more now, will you, my darling?" exclaimed the favoured lover; "but it was most honourable of you to mention it, and I admire you for it. Most married people have some little secret of the kind to leave behind them, Muriel. Even *I*, you see, have had a wife before yourself, although I can safely say that I never loved a woman till I saw your sweet face."

"And you have two big grown-up sons, Lady Rhylton says," replied Muriel, glad to get away from a topic which made her heart ache and her cheeks burn; "will they be *my* sons too? How funny!"

"Oh, don't talk of them," said the colonel with suddenly knit brows. "I never mention the subject if I can help it. They are two great mis-shapen cubs, Muriel, not a bit

like me, and we have never had any sympathy with each other. They are their mother's children, not mine; and as soon as they were old enough I shipped them off to India, where I trust they will remain. There is no need to think of them, my dearest. They will never disturb our married happiness."

"How funny!" repeated Muriel in her childish way, as she tried to picture the two sons in far-off India.

"What we *have* to think of," continued de Crespigny, "is how soon I can take you away from a home where you are not happy. Will next month be too soon, Muriel? May I suggest it to Lord Rhylton before I go to-night?"

"Yes, yes!" she said clinging to him, "let it be next month. I cannot bear to think of living with Lady Rhylton even for that space of time. But, Arthur, I can only have such a *trousseau* as papa can buy for

me. I will not take another pocket-handkerchief from that woman's hand."

"Come to me just as you are and I shall be content," exclaimed the colonel rapturously. "And now let me dry these tears. Do not give the countess the slightest cause to doubt the fulness of our content. Yes, Muriel, you are right; she is an evil-minded and dangerous woman, and the sooner you are quit of her the better. But in this world, my dear, we must dissemble."

They dissembled so well at the family dinner that succeeded, that no one could have guessed that anything had occurred to annoy them, and before Colonel de Crespigny returned to his town residence that night, his marriage with Lady Muriel Damer had been fixed to take place exactly four weeks from that date.

## CHAPTER V.

“NO FAITH—NO HOPE.”

ATHOL FERGUSSON returned to Woolwich after his interview with Lord Rhylton and his daughter like a man walking in a dream. The blow he had received had stunned him. He could not believe, at first, that it was true. Had he really been within the doors of Oakley Court and seen his Muriel again, and heard her say that she was engaged to be married to another man? His thoughts travelled back with irritating pertinacity to the days at Revranches, when the fair-haired slender girl in her shabby convent dress and hat, used to esteem it her greatest pleasure to meet him on the Ramparts, and to echo the words of love and vows of fidelity he poured into her ear. How they had sworn

to be faithful to each other, through every sort of difficulty and danger, in those dear old days, and now, two months only had passed away and Muriel had already forgotten him. She had deceived him. She had never loved him. Those sweet curved lips of hers must have been uttering falsehoods, all the time he thought them so pure and true. So Athol argued — being too young to know how a girl's mind may be coerced by those older and more experienced than herself—and what a long, long stretch of time a few years in prospect appear, to one who has only numbered eighteen. The young man (for there was nothing of a boy about Athol Fergusson) had set his whole heart upon marrying his first love, and the disappointment of his hopes was a greater shock to him, than appeared upon the surface. It was for *this* in reality, that he had worked and striven so hard as to pass his examination with first - class honours. It

was for *this* that he had led a pure and upright life, fearful lest by lowering himself he might contaminate his idol. Muriel had been in truth the load-star of his existence—the goal he had striven to reach—the bright reward shining for him in the distance, which it might have taken him years to win, but which (had Heaven so pleased) he would have grasped at last, and held in arms which had never opened to enfold another woman. That had been his dream—to work for her steadily, and win her worthily—but she had shattered it in a few words. An older man less sure of himself and with more knowledge of the world, would have feared from the beginning that the difference that had suddenly arisen between their stations in life, would put an end to their intercourse. But Athol had had no such fear. He had anticipated Lord Rhyton’s objections to his youth and poverty—but never dreamed that Muriel—*his* Muriel—his promised wife—would join

issue with her father to cast him off. It was the turning point of his life. He had journeyed to Oakley Court somewhat nervous and despondent, but with a strong faith in the affection of his *fiancée* and a hope that their joint solicitations might induce the earl to rescind his verdict. He returned to his quarters at Woolwich with his hope dead, and his faith scattered to the four winds of Heaven. He did not elect any one as a *confidant* of his troubles—that was not in the disposition of Athol Fergusson—he kept them to himself, and never opened his mouth on the subject; but it was pre-evident that he was suffering. Richard Kane, his chum in quarters and his greatest friend at the Academy—who was gazetted to the same regiment, and was to sail in the same ship—saw plainly that “old Ath” had received a blow of some kind or other, but intimate as they were, there was a dignity and reserve about young Fergusson that inspired respect

in his associates, and Kane did not presume to try and force his confidence. There was an unexpected delay in their starting for Malta, and before he sailed, Athol had read the announcement and description of Lady Muriel Damer's marriage in the society papers. He did not shirk the ordeal nor spare himself one detail of the ceremony that was the grave of all his hopes, but read every word from beginning to end, even to the description of the bride's dress, and the list of presents she had received, and then he destroyed the papers that contained the news, and never alluded to the subject. Only, over his dark blue eyes there fell a deeper shadow than before and his sensitive mouth was seldom seen to indulge in a genuine, heartfelt smile. Amongst his male companions, Athol could apparently shake off his melancholy and be as gay and boisterous—sometimes almost as wild as they were—but directly he was by himself, or

alone with Richard Kane, his grave serious air returned, until it became habitual. Of course his mother and his sister Helen had not lost the excellent opportunity afforded them by Lady Muriel's marriage, to prove to him that *they* had been right in their opinion of her and *he* had been wrong. Mrs. Fergusson indeed, never forgot to thank God, in each of her letters, that her poor son had been delivered from such an intolerable snare, as marrying so forward and unprincipled a girl; whilst Helen trusted that his eyes were opened at last, and that in the future he would be more ready to take the advice of people who knew better than himself. Athol was of too sweet a disposition and temperament openly to resent his mother's and sister's remarks, but they ruffled him more than anything else had the power to do. And could they have seen sometimes, the dewy mist that overspread his eyes, as he read their unkind and thoughtless re-

marks, and the effort he was forced to make to regain control over himself, they might well have been ashamed of increasing the trouble which his brave young spirit was fighting so hard to bear. His chum, Dick Kane, who was sincerely attached to him, could not imagine what ailed “old Ath,” unless it was leaving England, but he hoped when the voyage was over he would be himself again. Yet when they were settled in Malta, it was still the same. It is true that Malta is a stupid place enough, and that one soon grows sick of its round of amusements and longs for the cold winds and rough life of old England. Still, there is plenty of pleasure and employment for young people who are not utterly *blasés*, and where there is a mixture of sexes, there is generally also plenty of excitement. But Athol held aloof from his fellow-creatures, and refused to enter society, and the fact, instead of deteriorating from his interest,

rather enhanced it in the eyes of the fair sex, who are always on their mettle, directly they have cause to believe a man tries to avoid them. They can imagine but one reason for his indifference—that he thinks too much of another woman—and they are up in arms at once to try and out-rival her. This was much the case with the ladies of Malta, married and single. From the wife of the Governor, down to Lieutenant Jones's youngest daughter, they all wanted to know why the handsome young man who had lately joined the Royal Artillery, never looked at them, nor asked to be introduced, when they met him at the band, or during the evening promenade. What was his name? How old was he? Where did he come from? and “Why did he look so sad?” Such were the questions that fell incessantly from their lips addressed to other officers of the brigade. But no one seemed able to answer them satisfactorily. Fergusson was

a newly arrived subaltern, a Scotchman, poor as a church mouse and proud as the steeple, with nothing at all interesting about him, that was all they knew, and the ladies had better turn their attention to something that would repay it better. But ladies are rather fond of having their own way, and one and all determined to make the proud, serious young Scotchman come out of his shell, and join in their sports and amusements. Athol could never appear at the band now, without undergoing at least half a-dozen introductions by special desire, which were invariably followed by invitations to dinners, or to dances, or lawn tennis in the cool of the evening. He kept on refusing these invitations, and tearing up the dainty little notes that conveyed them, until he became wearied of the operation.

“Why can’t they leave a fellow alone?” he complained testily to Kane. “This is the third invitation Mrs. Vivian has sent me

in a fortnight. Can't she see that I don't want to go to her stupid parties?"

"Well, you *are* ungrateful, Ath. Half the boys in the station would be only too glad to get such a chance. They'd jump at it. Mrs. Vivian is the prettiest woman on the island, by long chalks."

"Is she?" yawned Fergusson indifferently.

"*Is she?*" repeated Kane mimicking him. "Why, of course she is. Where are your eyes? Laura Vivian is the toast of Malta, and many a fellow has gone half daft, *pour l'amour de ses beaux yeux*. And she's a tolerable flirt into the bargain, if all that's said of her is true. Why, man, you've got the devil's own luck. Three invitations in a fortnight. She must have taken a regular fancy to you. Go in and win."

"Nonsense. I don't want to get into any scrapes with married women. Let her flirt with Vivian if she wants to flirt."

"It seems to me that you fight as shy of

the single ones as the married ones, Ath.  
Have you taken a vow to remain a bachelor?”

“My father took that vow for me when  
he lost all his money,” returned Athol with  
a bitter laugh.

“Oh! come, old boy, many a man marries  
on his pay. I hope to do so some day, if  
a certain little lady in England keeps her  
promise to wait a year or two.”

“Do you expect her to do so?” asked  
the other in an incredulous tone.

“Of course. Ellie’s as true as the day,  
and we exchanged rings just before we  
parted. Besides she’s not likely to be  
tempted to be unfaithful to me, for her  
people are very poor and never go into  
society.”

“Ah. That fact may ensure her fidelity,”  
said his companion.

“My dear old Ath. What’s come to you?  
You’re very bitter, and sarcasm doesn’t sound  
right, somehow, from your lips.”

“Am I bitter? Perhaps my life has made me so. However, let’s have a couple of sherry cobblers and drink to your Ellie’s fidelity. It’s to be hoped that no man with thirty or forty thousand a year, will propose to her during your absence.”

“I hope not sincerely,” replied Kane laughing, “for I’m afraid I should stand no chance against him. But seriously, Ath, won’t you go to Mrs. Vivian’s?”

“Perhaps I may. It is, after all, exceedingly dull in this place.”

“And I really think the dulness is having an effect on your health. Laura Vivian will brighten you up. She is very lively, and witty, and a charming singer. An evening at her house will do you all the good in the world.”

So Athol took his friend’s advice, and Laura Vivian was delighted to have triumphed over all the other English ladies in Malta, and wrung an acceptance out of the shy new-

comer—simply because he had seemed difficult to subdue, and women love a difficulty where men are concerned. Her acquaintanceship (as a rule) was rather a dangerous one for an inexperienced youth, for she was a full-blown specimen of that well-known genus, the Army flirt. She was still young, not more than seven or eight and twenty, very pretty and very entertaining, and she won hearts as easily as she tired of them. She never intended to go too far (and it is to be presumed that her husband, Major Vivian, had no idea that she did so), yet there were one or two stories afloat concerning the fascinating Laura, that made prudent people fight shy of her. Just now she was in rather *mauvaise odeur* with the military society in Malta, her latest admirer, Captain Lovelace, having been ordered back to England, and Mrs. Vivian’s grief at his departure a little too openly expressed. Her volatile heart was indeed just ready to be caught in the

rebound, and most young men would have fallen easily into the trap, and been proud to ride, or walk about Malta by her side, and be acknowledged as her favoured cavalier. But Athol Fergusson was proof against her witcheries. His was not a mind easily impressed by women, and Muriel Damer's image was engraven too deeply on it to make way for any other. He was like a widower who has unexpectedly lost her whom he fondly believed would walk beside him all through life, and who turns with disgust from any overtures made to him, with a view to displacing her memory. Athol went to dine with Major and Mrs. Vivian, and made himself agreeable in his quiet way, but he never paid his hostess a single compliment, though he sat alone with her for half-an-hour in the balcony after dinner, and his indifference piqued her into asking him to her house again and again. She was the owner of a little pleasure boat, and was very fond of

going on the water when the heat of the day had passed, and this was an amusement in which Athol could join her with interest to himself, for he understood the management of a sailing vessel perfectly. Evening after evening therefore they spent together on the deep blue waters of the bay of Malta, and Dick Kane chuckled to himself as he thought that “Old Ath” was actually “caught” at last, though all his time was employed in steering the boat, and his conversation with Mrs. Vivian consisted chiefly of monosyllables. In this manner, interspersed with the ordinary military duties, nearly six months passed away, when one afternoon, the wind suddenly got up as they were rounding the point of the bay, and the flimsy little bark nearly capsized. Indeed if it had not been for the promptitude and presence of mind of Athol Fergusson, they certainly must have been swamped, and probably drowned, for the Maltese sailors, who assisted him in her

management, lay down at the bottom of the boat and began to say their prayers, instead of taking in the sails. Athol, however, worked, as only an Englishman can work in a moment of danger, and all ended well, excepting that Mrs. Vivian and a young lady who was with her, got wetted through by the waves washing over them, and had to be conducted home as quickly as possible to change their clothes. Athol (who thought nothing of the adventure, except as something to laugh over) returned to his barracks, and was relating the circumstance to Kane, when he received a hastily scrawled note from Laura Vivian, asking him to go and see her after mess, and stating that the bearer would wait for an answer.

“Hang it all,” cried the young fellow impatiently, “I *can’t* go this evening. Wilkinson and Marshall are engaged to play a game of billiards for ten pounds a side, and I want to see them.”

“But they don’t begin till eleven o’clock,” said Kane. “You’ll have time to run up and see the fair Laura before they begin.”

“But what can she want to see me for?” grumbled Fergusson. “We’ve been talking all the afternoon. I’ve got nothing more to say to her.”

“Perhaps she wishes to thank you for your services on the water. Rogers told me it was a very close shave, and that she might thank her stars you were at the helm.”

“It was all her own fault, Dick. She insisted upon rounding the point. I combated the notion till I was almost rude, but you know what women are when they have got an idea into their heads. You can do nothing with them.”

“Well, don’t keep the man waiting any longer. Write and say either one thing or the other, but I should run up for ten minutes if I were you. The Vivians have shown you no end of politeness.”

“ You’re right there, Dick, and I will do as you advise.” So he sat down, and scribbled a couple of lines to say he would wait on Mrs. Vivian at ten that evening, and having dispatched his answer, he dismissed the matter completely from his mind, and commenced to dress for the mess dinner. As they rose from table, Dick Kane whispered to him, “ Don’t forget your appointment,” and he answered, “ I shan’t be gone ten minutes,” as he walked away.

As he entered the house of his friends, his first inquiry was for Major Vivian, but the servant said that he was not at home.

“ Where is the major?” he asked, as he encountered Mrs. Vivian. “ I wanted to carry him back with me to see a billiard match played between Wilkinson, of ours, and Captain Marshall, of the Seventieth. Will he be absent long?”

“ He has gone to Valetta to see some old friends,” replied the lady, casting down her

eyes, “and he will not be home again for two or three days.”

“Indeed!” said Athol, seating himself, “and was it a sudden arrangement? Didn’t you know of it when we went out this afternoon?”

“Of course I did. He started early this morning. Why do you look surprised?”

“That you shouldn’t have mentioned your husband’s absence to me.”

“Oh, do you think it is of so much consequence to me as all that?” replied Mrs. Vivian, pouting. “If I had said anything, it would have been to ask you to congratulate me on my temporary liberty. Marriage is not such a bed of roses, but that we are glad to be free from it occasionally.”

“I am sorry to hear you say that,” he answered gravely. “It *ought* to be the greatest happiness in the world. But may I ask why you wished to see me to-night? Is there anything which I can do for you?”

Laura Vivian raised her eyelids, and looked

reproachfully at him as he spoke, and then he observed for the first time how very tastefully she was attired, in a soft white muslin gown, trimmed with lace and ribbons, and how red her eyes were, as if she had been crying. In a moment it flashed across him that he had been cruelly indifferent to her appeal. She might be in some trouble, from which he had the power to extricate her, and anxious to make amends for his coldness he rose from his seat and approached the sofa on which she sat.

“Surely,” he continued, “you are not grieving for anything. Tell me! how can I comfort you?”

“Sit down here,” replied Mrs. Vivian, motioning him to the seat by her side, and as he obeyed her behest, she put her head down on his shoulder and commenced to cry.

“I am so very, *very* unhappy,” she murmured, “and you must know *why*.”

Athol felt himself to be in a very un-

pleasant predicament. He had no feeling whatever for this very pretty woman who had elected to sob on his shoulder, and yet, *because* she was “very pretty,” she made his heart beat faster, and he did not know how to relieve himself of the burden. Had she been old and ugly, he would have risen quickly enough from the sofa, and left her to support herself. But it has ever been the case in this world, and it ever will be, till the world ends. Beauty holds a power over men that no amount of virtue can prevent, though it may successfully resist it. And yet—even while his heart beat faster to hold her in his arms—he felt disgusted with her for being there.

“Mrs. Vivian!” he exclaimed, as he tried to make her sit up straight on the sofa; “dear Mrs. Vivian! be calm; be careful, for your own sake, I implore you. Some of the servants might come in.”

“No, no! they won’t,” she replied im-

patiently; “but oh, Athol, I am so shaken by what occurred this afternoon. I was terribly alarmed—for *your* sake more than my own—and I felt I could not sleep until I had seen with my own eyes that you were really safe and well.”

“Oh, you may be assured of *that*,” he said laughing uneasily. “I am as well as ever I was in my life. I am too well used to all sorts of weathers to mind a wetting. I am sorry you were so much alarmed—but, indeed, it was very rash of us to try and round the point, and I shouldn’t have allowed it—but ‘all’s well that ends well’ remember, and we will take care not to expose ourselves to such a danger again.”

“But I haven’t *thanked* you,” said Laura Vivian fervently. “You saved my life and Ella Lawson’s. You are our preserver, and I can never, *never* do enough to prove my gratitude, and my—my—affection for you,” she added in a lower voice.

“Oh, now, really, Mrs. Vivian, you are going too far,” replied Athol. “Boating parties are placed in the same danger every day of the week, and a little promptitude averts the peril. You mustn’t make so much out of a mere trifle.”

“I *could* not make too much of it,” she insisted, with her face perilously close to his own; “besides, it was all my own fault, and I placed *your* life in danger, and if—if—anything had happened to you it would have broken my heart.”

“Exaggeration—exaggeration,” he cried playfully, trying hard to avert a worse danger that was close upon him. But Laura Vivian would not be baulked of her intention.

“It is *not* exaggeration,” she whispered into his ear, “because—because—I *love* you!”

Then all his quasi-sentiment and pity changed to contempt, and he rose quickly from the sofa and stood before her.

"Mrs. Vivian! for God's sake, think what you are saying—*you*, a married woman."

"I can't help that," she answered, weeping with mortification at his repulse; "I am miserable with Major Vivian. I never *did* care for him from the very beginning, and of late years it has been unbearable. And I have so little comfort or affection, so few friends I care for, and now you—*you*—"

Sobs choked the words upon her lips, and she was unable to proceed.

"And have I not been your friend?" demanded Athol, in his rich, musical voice; "have I not joined in your amusements and occupations and done everything for you that was in my power, and consistent with my duty towards your husband?"

"Oh, bother your duty towards him. You wouldn't think twice of *that* if you cared for *me*," she said almost spitefully.

"I think I should, Mrs. Vivian, at all events I *hope* I should, for I can conceive nothing

more dishonourable than to visit at a man's house and accept his hospitality whilst you cherish any feeling for his wife that you would be ashamed to confess to him. But that is not the case with me. It is best I should say it now at once and for ever. I admire you immensely, and I have been proud to call you my friend, but there is no warmer place in my heart for any woman.”

“You are in love, then?” exclaimed Mrs. Vivian, forgetting her grief in her curiosity, and raising herself so as to look into his face. “No man of your age would have spoken to me as you have done to-night, unless he had been head over ears in love with another woman.”

“I don't think I am,” replied Athol sadly; “at least I know that I try my hardest to stamp it down and crush it; but I *have been* very fond of some one, Mrs. Vivian, and I am afraid her place in my affections will not be easily refilled.”

"And doesn't she love you in return, then?" she demanded with feminine sympathy.

Athol shook his head.

"Oh, my poor boy. You are worse off than I am. Is there no hope?"

"There is no hope," he answered impatiently. "She is a married woman. Don't mistake me, Mrs. Vivian. The sentiments I expressed just now came straight from my heart, and I have never yet outraged them. But I knew the lady I referred to long before she was married. We were engaged to each other, but she jilted me for a richer man. That is all my story. A very common one, doubtless, but so are death and sickness and all the other ills of life. At any rate, it has settled my fate, and I shall never be a married man—nor the lover of other men's wives," he added after a pause.

"Mr. Fergusson," said Laura Vivian with an effort, "I am so ashamed of myself. I

am not half so good as you are. I *do* like you awfully, and I shouldn't have minded a flirtation with you *pour passer le temps*, but I'm glad you put me in the right place, for you are not the first, and I don't mind telling you so.”

“I *know* I should not have been the first,” said Athol frankly, “for I have heard all about Captain Lovelace and one or two others. But, oh! Laura, what a life it is to lead. How will it end? What will you do when you grow old and the love for such frivolity leaves you, and you will have estranged your husband perhaps for ever?”

“I don't know. I've never thought of it in that light, though, of course, I didn't suppose it would go on for ever. However, I'm safe for awhile now, for—though I haven't said much about it—your eyes have riddled me through and through, Athol, and it will take me some time to forget them.”

“And during that time I had better not

come near here again," said Athol seizing his cap.

"What an old mentor you are. One would suppose you were sixty, instead of twenty-three. Well, you must do as you like, but I shall be very dull without you. We should have had a very pleasant time together, I am sure of that; but I am not going to cut my throat for love of you, all the same. I've gone mad once or twice in my lifetime for love of a man, and I don't mean to do it again. And so you are really going. Kiss me, and say you forgive me before we part."

"I have nothing to forgive," he answered as he stooped down and kissed her gravely on the forehead as a brother might have done.

But the episode, quickly as it had passed, made the impression he had conceived of woman's faith and constancy harder than it had been before.

“So this is *marriage*,” he thought to himself as he strolled back to the messhouse. “This is the fidelity of wives during the absence of their husbands—this is the way they dishonour their vows and defile their hearthstones, for the sake of having a ‘pleasant time’ with the first young fellow that takes their fancy. Is it thus that Muriel would have dishonoured me? Perhaps it might have been. Then thank God, Who has preserved me from it, for I think if I had found her false I should have murdered her. And yet—has she not been false to me as it is in every sense of the word? Why cannot I, therefore, murder her memory, and let it trouble me no more?”

There was an increase of gloom about young Fergusson’s manner after this little episode that greatly troubled Richard Kane, who watched his friend as closely as if he had been his brother. He thought perhaps that “Old Ath” was bothered about his money affairs.

He knew that he did not possess a farthing beyond his pay, and how difficult it is for a young officer to make ends meet on that. Athol was too proud to speak of his poverty before his acquaintances, or borrow money from them, still more to run into debt, and so he was obliged to practise a rigid economy, which prevented his joining in the same amusements as other men of his age, and put him at a disadvantage with his brother officers. Yet he never grumbled at his lot. The design, which he always kept before him, of being able at some future time to help his mother, and pay off his father's creditors, made privation light, and he went on his way without heeding the remarks of his companions, and only anxious to do his duty.

Kane admired him beyond all description. He considered Athol the finest character with which he had ever been brought in contact, and was never tired of singing his praise to

others. Judge then of his delight when one morning, about a year after they had been sent out to Malta, he heard his friend calling him in excited tones to enter his barrack-room, where he found Athol with an open letter in his hand.

“Oh ! my dear Kane,” he exclaimed as soon as he saw him, “I have just received the most wonderful news. My uncle, Sir Robert Fergusson, has died of a fit of apoplexy (you know his little boy was carried off by scarlet fever last spring) and I have succeeded to the baronetcy. Here is the lawyer’s letter to tell me so.”

Kane’s excitement was almost greater than his own.

“My dear, dear old Athol,” he exclaimed, slapping him on the back, while the tears sprung to his eyes, “I am so *very* glad. Now you will have money, as you ought to have, old boy, and not be obliged to screw and deny yourself as you have done any more.”

"Now I shall be able to wipe off the stain from my poor father's name," said Athol solemnly, "and keep my dear mother and sisters in comfort. Yes, Dick, I am very thankful. But—if we could only tell what is coming for us in the future."

He was thinking of Muriel as he spoke, and Dick Kane (who knew all about the trouble of his friend's life) guessed to whom his thoughts had wandered, and forbore to make any comment on his words.



## CHAPTER VI.

### THE LITTLE RIFT.

FIVE months after Lady Muriel Damer's marriage she was sitting alone in her boudoir in the splendid mansion in Queen's Gate which Colonel de Crespigny had taken and furnished for her. If she had dreaded the sting of poverty and longed for luxury and wealth, surely she ought to have been contented now. The house, which from the attics to the basement was fitted up with the most perfect taste, was as artistic as it was commodious, and contained more servants than there was work for. The colonel, who had determined that his second marriage should herald his entrance into fashionable society, had spared no expense to prepare a home worthy of receiving the guests that should

congregate round Lady Muriel de Crespigny. The guests however had not yet made their appearance in any number, because it was the Christmas season, and the majority of London residents were spending it in the country. The colonel had also thought of taking possession of his seat in Kent until the new year had dawned upon them, but it had not been tenanted for some years past and was scarcely fit to receive a bride; he therefore decided to put off their visit until another time. So Lady Muriel sat in her London home, a married woman, and with every outward sign of prosperity and happiness. Her boudoir was furnished with pale rose-coloured silk and panelled in ivory-white, and it opened upon a tiny conservatory, full of the choicest hot-house flowers. The walls were hung with water-colour drawings by modern masters, the velvet mantel-shelf was covered with Sèvres and Dresden china, in a basket by the fire lay a tiny

terrier of about two pounds weight, and a large cage of foreign birds stood between the windows. All her possible girlish tastes seemed to have been thought of and gratified. Her half-finished painting stood upon an easel, an expensively inlaid mother-of-pearl and gold workbox was upset on the centre table, and the couch was littered with the periodical literature of the day. And Lady Muriel herself, in a crimson plush tea-gown, trimmed with costly lace, with a diamond spray brooch at the ruffle round her slender throat, and her fingers glittering with rings, seemed a fit genius to preside over the luxurious abode.

But, oh! how old she felt compared to what she had done five months ago. She was thinking of it as she bent forward from the low chair she occupied, and held her hands out to the flickering flame. Could it possibly be only five months since she had been transformed from a simple childish girl

into the wife of Colonel de Crespigny? She could hardly believe it. Marriage is such a complete awakening for most women, and more especially for an innocent maiden handed over to the tender mercies of a man of the world. Lady Muriel's wedding-day had rather been hurried on than otherwise, for Oakley Court had not been a very pleasant home for her after her quarrel with Lady Rhylton. The countess had never forgiven her step-daughter for what she termed "insulting" her, and Lady Muriel had not made matters better by refusing to accept anything for her *trousseau* from Lady Rhylton's hands. No, not even the customary wedding gift which each of her friends considered it their privilege to offer her. She left Oakley Court with nothing but what her father had provided for her, and her obstinacy caused a serious breach between her and her relations. But she had not minded it then. Colonel de Crespigny

had taken her to Italy, and in the delight of travelling and seeing new places of historic interest, Lady Muriel had not bestowed a thought on Oakley Court. Several things, however, that her husband said and did during the honeymoon considerably startled her, but when he had decided that their intimacy was fully established, and he might give free vent to the thoughts that occupied his mind, she shrank from him with horror. It is the means by which many men disgust their wives in the first months of marriage. They overlook the fact that the things which are every-day occurrences to them have been sealed books hitherto to the girl whom, perhaps, they have selected from her companions for her purity and modesty. They falsely imagine that the circumstance of becoming a wife renders her at once fit and willing to partake in their life-long experience of indelicacy and vice.

And Colonel de Crespigny was essentially

coarse-minded and foul-mouthed. He had wallowed in sensuality ever since he had arrived at man's estate, and boasted of it as though it had been a feather in his cap. His first marriage had not had the power to keep him faithful to his wife, and neither would his second, directly the first bloom was off his fancy. He did not know what it was to love a woman for anything better than her personal attractions, and every one knows how that kind of love ends—in satiety and indifference. Lady Muriel had already begun to experience the difference of her husband's moods, when his passion was excited, and his passion was worn out, and as she leant over the blazing fire and thought of it, she shuddered—yes, shuddered, though only five months had passed since her wedding day. At times, he frightened her with his vehemence and hurt her with his rough embraces, and at others, he was cool and sulky, ready to take offence at the

least trifle, and absent at his club for hours together. Lady Muriel's thoughts travelled back on the present occasion to Athol Fergusson, and she could not help wondering if *he* would ever have treated her so. She had not yet arrived at the stage of comparing the two men in her imagination, and regretting the loss of her first lover, but as she dreamed, with her eyes fixed on the fire, she seemed to feel the touch of the young man's moist lips laid so gently and yet so tenderly upon her own, and shrunk from the remembrance of her husband's hot mouth, which seemed to hurt and blister her own. But here the tiny terrier, Fly, jumped up in her basket and barked shrilly, as some one entered the boudoir. It was a powdered footman bearing a silver salver with a card.

“Mrs. Lorrimer, my lady, waiting in the drawing-room to see you,” he said.

Lady Muriel was not yet *au fait* with the

highest social decorum. She too often evinced her feelings before her dependants.

"What a nuisance," she exclaimed in a tone of vexation. "What on earth does she come here for so often? I am sure *I* don't want to see her."

But as the footman was unable to answer his mistress's questions, and only stood like a carved statue in the doorway, she addressed herself to him :

"Show Mrs. Lorrimer up here, James. Say I have a cold, and have not been down-stairs to-day. How I wish you had said that I wasn't at home."

"Your ladyship gave no orders," stammered the servant.

"I know; it isn't your fault. Go and show her up, and tell them to serve tea at once."

And then she rose, and looked at her hair in the mirror, and shook out her skirts, and wondered again *why* Mrs. Lorrimer

should call so often. The fact is that Caroline Lorrimer was beginning to look on the house in Queen's Gate as a second home. Colonel de Crespigny encouraged her to do so, and as she could not *unmake* his marriage with Lady Muriel she bowed her head like a wise woman to the inevitable, and determined to reap as much benefit from her misfortune as she was able. She was included in the list of guests for every party they gave, and dined with them *en famille* two and three times a week. Lady Muriel was getting sick of it. She disliked the pale flabby woman with her greenish eyes, for she was neither sympathetic nor interesting, and especially she had grown to resent the presence of the awkward and unmannerly Arthur, who invariably accompanied his mother since the Christmas vacation had begun, and generally ended by overturning a table and breaking some of her little specimens of china. Mrs. Lorrimer

was, however, one of her husband's oldest friends, and Arthur was his godson, and so she felt bound to be civil to them and conceal her real feelings concerning their constant appearance. Fly, who detested them both, and saw no necessity for disguising it, flew at Caroline Lorrimer as she entered the room, and tried to bite her boots.

"What a very unpleasant little animal that is," remarked Mrs. Lorrimer when the preliminary greetings were over; "quite dangerous. If I were Colonel de Crespigny, I wouldn't allow it about the house."

"Perhaps Colonel de Crespigny is not allowed to express an opinion on the subject," replied Muriel laughing, as she caught up her little dog, for Mrs. Lorrimer always dilated largely on the duty of wives towards their husbands before her, and she loved to excite her ire and draw her out.

"*Not allowed*, Lady Muriel? Surely you cannot think of the meaning of the words

you use. I cannot imagine my old friend Colonel de Crespigny being dictated to by anybody."

"Can't you? Then you should hear *me* dictating to him sometimes. You wouldn't know your 'old friend.' He's so meek. I beg your pardon, Arthur, but you are sitting on my plush embroidery, and you'll spoil it."

"Put it on the table, my dear," said his mother. "Poor child, you're always doing something wrong. Can he run up into his godpapa's dressing-room, Lady Muriel, and change his boots? He has his shoes in his pocket."

"Oh, is it worth his while?" asked Muriel, purposely misunderstanding her guest, whilst a flush of annoyance rose to her cheek. "You'll be leaving again so soon."

"If you *desire* it, of course," returned Mrs. Lorrimer with an offended air; "but as I have some matters of the utmost importance on which to consult my old friend and

trustee, I thought perhaps I might venture to invite myself to dinner."

Mrs. Lorrimer had invented the fiction of the trusteeship as a suitable excuse to obtain private interviews with the colonel, during which she usually treated him to tears for his neglect of her and her darling boy.

"Oh, certainly," replied Lady Muriel with quiet politeness, although she felt blank at the prospect of another stupid evening.

"You were not going out then? I shall not detain you at home," said Caroline Lorrimer as she sipped her tea.

"No; I caught cold at the theatre last night, and have been nursing myself all day by the fire. My husband has gone over to the Court."

That term "*my husband*" from Lady Muriel's lips always grated terribly on Mrs. Lorrimer's ears.

"Oh, indeed," she replied icily, "but of course he will return for dinner."

"Perhaps," said Muriel, shrugging her shoulders, "but I shouldn't count on it if I were you."

Caroline Lorrimer elected to count on it, however, and a very uninteresting hour succeeded, during which the ladies were evidently at daggers drawn, though they did not dare to be otherwise than courteous to each other.

"It seems funny that Colonel de Crespigny should be your trustee," remarked Muriel, after a while; "you must be nearly as old as he is."

"That would be no obstacle," returned Mrs. Lorrimer, "though you are mistaken as to my age. I am nearly twenty years the junior of the colonel."

"And Arthur is fourteen! You must have been very young when he was born. And did the colonel know your husband? Were they friends too?"

"Captain Lorrimer was his brother officer,

and naturally they were very intimate," said Mrs. Lorrimer. "But how do you get on with Agnes Prudhomme, Lady Muriel?"

For Colonel de Crespigny had manœuvred to obtain Agnes's wish for her, and have her transferred from the Lorrimer establishment to his own.

"*How do I get on with her?*" repeated Muriel with arched brows. "Is that quite the term to use with regard to one's servants? I believe Rosette is very well satisfied with her, but Agnes is only under my lady's maid, you know, and chiefly employed in keeping my wardrobe in order."

"Oh, indeed! But I understood from her that she had been brought up quite as your equal in the Château des Lauriers."

Lady Muriel laughed unaffectedly.

"Oh, that is nonsense—a little bit of boasting on Miss Agnes's part. She wouldn't dare to say it before me. The Grants had a large family of children, and I daresay we all

romped together when we were young, but she was never anything but a servant as she is now. I was quite surprised when my husband told me she was in England. I can't imagine how she managed to get here. But she was always a sharp pushing girl, and I suppose she took service with some family coming across."

"I believe Colonel de Crespigny paid her passage. He asked me to receive her on landing in England, but I knew from the first that her ambition was to enter your service. And to tell you the truth, Lady Muriel, I wasn't sorry to get rid of her, for I found her lazy and disposed to be impertinent, and I am not so rich as you are, you know, and cannot afford to keep servants to look at."

"Rosette won't let her waste her time, nor be saucy either, I am sure of that," replied Muriel. "She is a very steady, respectable woman herself, and made Agnes tuck away her curls and put on a cap the first day she

came. I don't think she liked it though," she continued, with a girlish giggle; but at that moment the door opened again, and Colonel de Crespigny entered. He was in walking costume, just as he had entered the hall-door, and he brought a whiff of the cold December air in with him.

"Holloa!" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell on the group by the fire. "You here, Caroline, and Arthur! Well, how are you? All right?" And then he went up to Lady Muriel and embraced her fondly. "And how's my own darling?" he said. "Is your cold better, and have you been taking great care of your precious little self?"

He kissed her several times passionately as he concluded, and Muriel lifted up her face to greet him, and felt quite contented (for the time being) that it should be so, for the man's animal magnetism was over her, and when in his presence she forgot his faults.

Caroline Lorrimer turned her head aside whilst Colonel de Crespigny embraced his wife, but he did not observe the action, nor had he an idea that she was wounded by the sight. It was one of his peculiarities that he was not in the least sensitive at having witnesses to his love-making, but was quite as free in his manners before strangers as if he and Muriel had been alone. The girl often shrunk before his ardour, and showed her annoyance by the hot blushes that rose to her cheeks, but the mildest remonstrance was enough to make the colonel sulky for the rest of the day, and so she had already learned the wisdom of silence.

“Do you know what time it is?” he said next, as he examined his watch. “A quarter-past seven! The dinner-bell must have sounded fifteen minutes ago. You’ll be late for dinner, Muriel, if you don’t dress at once. Come along with me; I have a dozen things to tell you. Caroline will amuse her-

self here till we are ready." And with playful persistence he dragged his wife up from her seat and led her out of the room.

Mrs. Lorrimer sat where they had left her, her green eyes yellow with jealousy as she stared into the fire. This was what it had come to. She was nothing—nobody—a neglected friend—a tolerated guest—whilst that girl, almost a child by comparison with herself, occupied his whole thoughts and reigned queen paramount over his possessions. And she had another cause of complaint. Colonel de Crespigny had been in the habit of helping her considerably with her son's educational bills and her own household expenses, but since his marriage he had pleaded the heavy outlay he had in decorating and furnishing the mansion in Queen's Gate as an excuse for not being so open-handed as usual. He wanted to cast her off—to get rid of her and her boy, as disagreeable memories that might crop up at some future time to endanger the

peace of his domestic life, and she wouldn't stand it—that is what she said to herself. She would make him comprehend that very evening that if *she* was to suffer, *he* should suffer with her, and that if he wished to command her silence he must pay for it. She was falling in arrears with her rent, and had not been able to defray Arthur's quarterly bills, and her captain's widow's pension was a very sorry comfort to look forward to in the future. The greenish-blue eyes gleamed with a vicious light as Mrs. Lorrimer pondered thus in the deserted boudoir until her son roused her from her reverie.

"What are you thinking of, mamma? Is anything wrong? Your eyes look so queer in the firelight."

"Nothing, my dear; it is nothing. I am only a little bothered about money, but your god-papa will put it all right for me. Hush! here they come. Mind you don't say a word of it to anybody."

Colonel de Crespigny and Lady Muriel came laughing down the stairs together, for he had been relating some ludicrous story of her stepmother ; he in evening clothes, and she in a dress of grey velvet which showed off her pretty figure to perfection. They were preceded by a footman, bearing two lighted lamps with rose-coloured shades, that threw a most becoming tint over the luxurious little boudoir.

“Very cold, isn’t it ?” exclaimed the colonel, rubbing his hands over the fire, “wind due east. I wonder you ventured out to-night, Caroline. You’ll get bronchitis to a dead certainty.”

“Perhaps I shall,” she answered stiffly, “but I was obliged to come. I have a matter of the gravest importance to consult you upon.”

Colonel de Crespigny’s face fell. He guessed what the important matter was.

“Oh, well, let’s put it off till after dinner

at all events," he answered, "I can't discuss business on an empty stomach. When that's over, we'll have half-an-hour in the library together. Let me take you downstairs. Muriel, my angel, you must put up with Arthur, unless you prefer to turn me into a donkey between two bundles of hay."

"No, thank you," replied Muriel merrily, "I would rather have a small cavalier all to myself than half a big one."

And although she hated the touch of the lad's bony arm, she slipped her hand through it, and led him in the wake of her husband to the dining-room. The dinner was not a success, as far as sociability was concerned. De Crespigny tried to keep the ball of conversation rolling, by relating anecdotes he had heard at the Court, and messages with which he had been intrusted by Cecil to Muriel; but Mrs. Lorrimer sat like a death's head at the feast, without the ghost of a smile upon her face, until her silence and gloom

became intolerable and infected the rest of the party. The colonel perceived that he was in for a storm, and wishing to get it over, he said as soon as the meal was concluded :

“ Come, Carrie, we had better adjourn to the library and discuss your business, for you mustn’t stop out late this bitter weather. Muriel, my darling, will you take Arthur back to the boudoir, and wait for us there. We will join you as quickly as we can.”

His method of treating the interview between them was not encouraging, and his voice was still less so when the library doors had closed behind them, and he ejaculated impatiently :

“ Now, Carrie, whatever *is* the matter? More tears and reproaches for me, I suppose. But I must tell you plainly that I’m getting a little tired of them, and so I hope you’ll cut them short.”

“ I don’t know what I’ve done to make you

speak to me like *that*," she commenced, with ready resentment; "there *was* a time when you were always but *too* anxious to hear of my troubles, and try to alleviate them."

"Yes, yes, and so I am now. Well, what is it? Let's have the whole story."

"It is soon told, Arthur. I have not sufficient money to meet my expenses. My boy's bills come to thirty-six pounds, and Mr. Richards is worrying me for his rent for the June quarter."

"Well, of course he ought to have had it long ago, and as for the school accounts, they *must* be paid. I tell you what it is, Caroline, you're living too high. It's absurd to keep up a house of that size for yourself and a boy who will go out in the world in a couple of years, and I really don't see that Arthur is making the use he should out of that expensive school. Why not send him to King's College until he is settled in life?"

"But have you decided what you are going to make of him?"

"Don't ask me. It is for *you* to decide."

"Oh, *Arthur!*" she said reproachfully.

"Now look here, Caroline, you must learn to leave off appealing to me about the boy or yourself. I shall always be happy to help either of you—*when I can*; but you must not forget that as a married man I am placed in a totally different position from what I was, and whatever I may do for you must be done with the utmost secrecy. I cannot even promise that my assistance will be as ready as heretofore. All sorts of heavy expenses are cropping up in my new condition."

"And we shall be forgotten, or pushed to one side for it," she exclaimed angrily.

"You seem to ignore the fact that I might have prevented your marriage altogether if I had so chosen—that I could make it very hot for you even now, if I thought fit."

"You wouldn't *dare* to do so," he answered, "you would gain nothing by it, and you would let all the world know what you and your son are."

"Oh! you men are cruel," she said beginning to weep, "cruel as the devils in hell."

"Listen to me, Carrie, and pray don't make an open scandal of this matter. How much money will clear you?"

"A hundred and fifty pounds," she said between her sobs.

"I can't give you that—I can't indeed. You can have no idea how my wedding trip and furnishing this place has cleared me out, and just at Christmas too, when I shall want every halfpenny for myself."

"Well, we must starve then. I declare to you, Arthur, on my solemn word, I haven't as much ready money as will buy us a Christmas dinner."

"Come and stay with us then," he replied, suddenly struck with an idea how to get out

of the difficulty. “Pack up your traps and Arthur’s, and come and spend a few weeks here. I know my wife is longing for an excuse not to go to the Court, and your presence will afford her a good one. And before your visit is concluded, I may be able to think of some method by which to relieve your difficulties.”

Mrs. Lorrimer’s pale eyes suddenly glistened with delight. This invitation was of all things what she had most desired. To be in the same house with her old lover, morning, noon and night, was to have the opportunity of regaining the influence, which (in spite of the sudden passion he had conceived for his beautiful young wife) she flattered herself she still had the power to exert over him. But she was too politic to exhibit her triumph. She only looked down meekly, and said, “I should like it of *all* things, Arthur. Only *too* well—you must know that. Only it will be such exquisite pain to me.”

"Oh, rubbish, rubbish!" exclaimed de Crespiigny, who dreaded sentimentality above all earthly things (that is to say, as soon as he had tired of the sentimental). "It will be nothing of the sort. There will be no one here but yourselves, so young Arthur can have the run of the house, and we'll take him to see the pantomimes. Now that's settled, isn't it? and you had better come over as soon as you can—say next Thursday. Holloa! there's some one tapping at the door. Come in."

His permission was followed by the entrance of Arthur Lorrimer, who stammered out, "Oh, if you please, sir, Lady Muriel has a bad headache, and has gone to bed, and she told me to come down and tell you and mamma so."

"All right, my boy. Mamma and you will be going home directly, so it's just as well. Look here, Arthur," he continued, putting a couple of sovereigns in his hand, "there's a

tip for you, and next Thursday you're coming here to spend your Christmas holidays."

"With Lady Muriel?" cried the lad colouring.

"Holloa! Lady Muriel seems to have cut out the god-father already."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Lorrimer fervently; "that can *never* be. Arthur must never forget what we both owe to you—how good and kind a friend you——"

"Come, Carrie, that's enough. If you indulge in these heroics you may forget yourself some day and go too far. I see Arthur has brought down your things; you'd better put them on whilst James calls you a cab. I haven't seen my wife since the morning, and she'll be expecting me upstairs."

He hurried them both out of the house as soon as it was possible, and after smoking a cigar in his study, walked up to Muriel's dressing-room. He found her reclining in an arm-chair before the fire, with

a book in her hand, her pale blue *robe de chambre* contrasting most becomingly with the fair hair falling over her shoulders, and her little feet in velvet slippers, stretched out upon a white bear-skin rug.

“Are they gone?” she inquired as the colonel entered; “what a blessing! Arthur, I positively *detest* that woman.”

It was not a favourable opening, but de Crespigny had a great notion of being master in his own house, and also of bending everybody according to his will. So he replied, almost jauntily:

“You mustn’t say *that*, my darling, because she is going to be your guest for the next fortnight.”

“What do you mean?” cried Muriel, flinging down her book; “you are joking with me.”

“Indeed I am not. The Lorrimers are not by any means well off, and so I thought it a kindness to ask them to spend their

Christmas with us. They are coming next Thursday."

"And you never consulted *me*," said his wife with wide-open eyes. "You have asked that woman (whom you know I dislike) to pass a whole fortnight in my society, without even paying me the compliment of gaining my consent first. Well, then, I won't have her. *There!*"

"Don't talk nonsense. You *must* have her. She is one of my oldest friends, and I will not see her insulted."

"Then you may stay at home and entertain your oldest friend by yourself, for I shall go to my father's."

She had never spoken to her husband with so much decision before. He hardly knew she had it in her. This sudden insight to her character transformed her at once in his eyes from a girl to a woman, and he treated her as such.

"You will do no such thing," he thundered. "You will be good enough to re-

member that you are *my wife*, and your duty is to do as you are told."

"But not to receive guests who are distasteful to me."

"You will receive anybody whom I choose to invite to my house."

"Then I'll make myself so unpleasant to her that she'll never come here again. She shall wish herself out of the house quicker than she came into it. You cannot, at least, prevent my doing that."

Colonel de Crespigny's handsome face suddenly clouded over with a frown that destroyed all its beauty, and with an oath that made her shrink from him as if she had been struck in the face, he turned on his heel and left the room. The idea had presented itself to him for the first time that he might find himself some day between two fires with these women.

Lady Muriel gazed for a moment after him in silence, and then burst into a flood

of angry tears. Her husband had often sworn in her presence before, but never in so foul and blasphemous a manner, and the sound had shocked her terribly. She was still weeping when Agnes Prudhomme entered the room from the bedchamber.

"Excuse me, *miladi*," she said, "I was not aware that you had retired." And then, seeing that Lady Muriel was in tears, the old feeling of familiarity came over her, and she exclaimed, "Ah, *mademoiselle*, are you in trouble? Can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, Agnes, thank you. It is foolish of me to cry, but I feel upset. Colonel de Crespigny has invited some guests to stay here for the Christmas week without first consulting me."

"And *miladi* does not love her visitors?" Agnes interrogatively said.

"*I hate them!*" replied Muriel energetically. "They are that horrid Mrs. Lorrimer and her son."

“Ah!” exclaimed Agnes with a long-drawn breath, “Madame Lorrimer. *Miladi* has good reason to hate her.”

“What do you mean, Agnes?”

“Nothing — nothing, *miladi*. Perhaps I should not have spoken. But *le bon Dieu* has not given me my eyes and ears for nothing, and I have heard and seen things in Bryanston Square. Ah! I could tell *miladi* something if she chose to hear it.”

But by that time Muriel had become aware of the indiscretion of which she was guilty, and refused to listen any further.

“No, Agnes, I have no wish to hear it. Pray drop the subject. After all, Mrs. Lorrimer is one of the colonel’s greatest friends, and I must put up with her for his sake.”

“*Mais oui*, she is certainly one of the colonel’s greatest friends. I could have told *miladi that*,” replied Agnes, as she glided back into the bedroom, with a sneer upon her face.

## CHAPTER VII.

### MUTE MUSIC.

COLONEL DE CRESPIGNY rushed downstairs and bolted himself in his study, but he had not been there long before he began to consider if he were not a fool to quarrel with his wife on account of a woman of whom he was utterly tired. He was a man of loose principles, unbridled passions, and intemperate language, but Lady Muriel was his latest fancy, and he had already ascertained that, young as she was, she possessed a proud and impetuous disposition, and would not hesitate to resent (what she considered) an affront to her dignity. So after half-an-hour's cogitation with his meerschaum pipe, the colonel crept upstairs again, and knocked submissively at the dressing-room door. Muriel

(who was still agitated at the idea of having Mrs. Lorrimer thrust upon her as a companion) gave him permission to enter in a voice that was very suggestive of tears.

"My darling," exclaimed the colonel effusively, as he caught sight of her swollen face, "have I really made you cry? Oh, I am a brute—a beast—a devil! I deserve to be shot for speaking before you as I did. I wonder if you will ever forgive me."

He threw his huge form down on the bear-skin rug as he spoke, and taking her little slippered feet in his hands, kissed them over and over again. It is the sort of thing that disarms a woman's anger at once. She has nothing to say when a big strong creature, who could crush her (seemingly) with his little finger, abases himself in the folds of her dress and begs for mercy. De Crespigny knew the force of the situation. He had tried it many times before, and never

knew it fail. Lady Muriel's youth and inexperience succumbed to it at once.

"Oh, Arthur, pray don't do that. It is *I*, perhaps, who should ask *your* pardon. I spoke too hastily, but your intelligence annoyed me."

"No, no! It was all *my* fault. I should have delegated the duty of issuing the invitation to yourself. It falls naturally to you as the mistress of the house. But I did not stop to think. Caroline Lorrimer is like a sister to me, and I hoped you looked on her in the same light."

"Oh, dear no," cried Muriel; "let us understand each other on this point plainly, Arthur. Since you take such an interest in Mrs. Lorrimer I am willing to do all I can to make her visit here an agreeable one, but I can never regard her as a friend, and it is useless to deceive you in the matter."

"But why not?" he demanded with some anxiety. "What is it in her that you do

not like? She always appears to me to treat you with the utmost deference; and I should have thought that (having so few female relations of your own) you would have been glad to make a friend and *confidante* of a lady with so much more experience than yourself."

"I don't want her for a friend," answered Muriel shortly, "and I am not a woman to confide in my own sex. I don't trust them sufficiently. If I wanted a female *confidante* I should choose my step-sister, Cecil Seton, who is more of my age and loves me better than Mrs. Lorrimer will ever do."

"I think Caroline would love you as much as any one if you showed her that you wished it."

"But I don't wish it, and, Arthur, you are mistaken in her. I am certain she does not like me. If it did not seem too ridiculous I should almost say she was jealous of me. I see such a disagreeable look in her eyes

sometimes when I show her any of my things, and can hear the sneer in her voice when she makes remarks on them."

"Oh, my darling, you *must* be mistaken," exclaimed her husband, though he did not believe what he said. "However, you will make the best of it now, for my sake, won't you? I really *cannot* neglect, nor give up, so old a friend as Mrs. Lorrimer—the widow of one of my brother officers too. It would create a perfect scandal. And then, the boy—poor little Arthur—my god-son. How could I deny the responsibility I have incurred on his account?"

"No, I suppose not," replied Lady Muriel with a deep sigh; "but I shall be very thankful when their visit is over."

"Don't let us talk of it any more tonight, then, my sweetest," cried de Crespigny, who was "everything by turns, and nothing long." "Let us think of nothing but our love, and the happiness that accompanies

it. Ah! you little witch! you know you have but to show me the tip of your dainty foot, or the curve of your white arm, to wield me as you will. You are a veritable sorceress, and your enchantments render me as weak as a child in your hands."

He threw his arms passionately around her as he spoke, and Muriel was compelled to submit to one of those outbursts of affection on his part which she had already learned to accept at their true value. She heaved more than one secret little sigh as she resigned herself to his caresses, and realized how little she cared for them and how little she believed in them. But Colonel de Crespigny was firmly convinced that his kisses were sufficient to heal every wound, and that if *he* were satisfied everybody else must be satisfied too.

With such a prologue, it may be easily imagined that Mrs. Lorrimer's visit did not afford much satisfaction either to herself or

Lady Muriel de Crespigny. Try as hard as she would the latter could not infuse a genuine cordiality in her welcome of her guest ; and the other soon perceived that her presence was not desired by the mistress of the establishment. She took an early opportunity to complain of Lady Muriel's manner to Colonel de Crespigny, and in his anxiety to prevent a quarrel between the two ladies he paid so much attention to Mrs. Lorrimer and her son that it became remarkable. Young Arthur was allowed to run all over the mansion in Queen's Gate as he chose. Even Lady Muriel's boudoir was not held sacred from the invasion of his muddy boots, and he lounged over the delicately-tinted sofas and chairs, and pulled about the books of engravings and photographs in a way that made their owner feel inclined to box his ears twenty times in the day. Mrs. Lorrimer, also, when her first reticence had rubbed off, took unusual liberties for a guest in the

house; sitting up with the colonel in his smoking-room until all hours, and ordering the servants in their master's name to supply her with everything she might desire. She would decline to drive with Lady Muriel also, pleading a headache, or the requirements of her son as an excuse for her refusal; but when her hostess returned to the house she would find that Mrs. Lorrimer had gone out walking with the colonel, or some chance word at dinner betrayed the fact that she had taken tea with him at his club, or luncheon at Verey's. These petty deceptions and intrigues irritated Lady Muriel's naturally sweet disposition, and were the occasion of several disputes with her husband. But it always ended in the same way. Mrs. Lorrimer was declared to be one of Colonel de Crespigny's oldest and dearest friends, and Lady Muriel very silly and childish and illiberal to take offence at trifles. But still the cause of irritation continued, and Mrs.

Lorrimer's manner (from being cold and snappish) became at times almost insolent and overbearing. She would thrust (as it were) her son and herself under the observation of her hostess, as though she *dared* her to make a remark, or ask a question that should lead to an explanation between them.

"Dear boy!" she would sigh, as young Arthur left the room after having done all the mischief he was capable of, "one may almost *see* him grow. Isn't he an enormous fellow for only fourteen?"

"I really am not competent to give an opinion on the subject, Mrs. Lorrimer. I know nothing about boys," replied Muriel.

"Ah! but he *is*. He promises to be as tall as his dear god-papa. Let me see, what is the colonel's height, six foot three?"

"I believe so."

"You don't seem to take much interest in it. You should have seen him as he was when *I* first knew him. Such an Apollo."

“Do you mean an ‘Adonis?’ I should have thought he would have been more like Mars.”

“It is no use your laughing, Lady Muriel. The fact remains. He was an uncommonly splendid man, and many people think Arthur resembles his god-papa.”

“But how can that be? They are not related, are they?”

At this direct question—most innocently put—Mrs. Lorrimer affected to be terribly confused.

“Oh, dear! What a notion. What will you say next? It’s well no one heard you. But really, it *is* strange that Arthur should be such a monster, for I am not tall, as you see, and Captain Lorrimer was quite undersized.”

She was trying (by means that should not condemn herself) to infuse doubts and suspicions in the young wife’s mind. It was to her interest to cause a coolness between the

married couple that might throw de Crespiigny back on her for sympathy and affection. But Muriel was too innocent for her purpose. She only considered the subject most uninteresting.

"Well, I should try and stop his growing if I were you," she answered. "He is quite big enough already. He never seems to know what to do with his arms and legs."

"What an idea! He *couldn't* be too big to please me. I should like him to be just like the colonel, who is one of my oldest and dearest friends——"

"Yes, yes, I have heard all that before," cried Lady Muriel impatiently, at which Mrs. Lorrimer took offence, and relapsed into silence.

But there was some one else beside the lady of the house to whom the presence of Mrs. Lorrimer and her son seemed to give particular annoyance, and that was Agnes Prudhomme. She had been told off by

Madame Rosette to attend to the requirements of her former mistress, but she was so careless and inattentive—not to say impudent in her manner of address—that Mrs. Lorrimer was (rather imprudently) making constant complaints of her, which complaints were carried by the chief lady's maid to Lady Muriel.

“Agnes,” said the latter one day, as she encountered the girl in her dressing-room, “I want to speak to you. Rosette tells me that Mrs. Lorrimer has complained to her of your being inattentive and saucy. What have you said and done?”

“Nothing, *miladi*, that I am ashamed of. But I hate Madame Lorrimer, and I will not be her servant. *Voilà tout.*”

“*You will not*, Agnes. Is that the way to speak of a visitor to the house? Do you know that Mrs. Lorrimer has threatened to tell the colonel of your treatment of her orders?”

“Let her tell him, then, *miladi!* I have something too to tell of Madame Lorrimer that she may not like all the world to hear.”

“Agnes! I cannot understand you. What has made you so spiteful against this lady? Has she injured you?”

“Ah! *Mademoiselle Muriel,*” cried Agnes, relapsing (as she always did when under strong excitement) into French, “if I might tell you all I know, you would not keep that woman and her son one hour under your roof. It is a shame! an infamy! that she should be here. Bah! the pig! I could kick her into the street myself.”

“Agnes,” exclaimed Muriel, seizing her by the wrist, “you *must* tell me what you know. Why should I be kept in ignorance of what my own servants are aware of?”

“But I do not *dare*, *miladi!* These things always come back upon the informant. Only, if you would know the truth, hide

behind the screen in the colonel's study this evening; and if they think you have gone upstairs, you will soon understand what I mean. But for me—I open my lips no more. It is too dangerous. Only see and hear for yourself."

And with that, Agnes Prudhomme walked hastily away, as if to avoid further temptation. She left Lady Muriel in a whirl of horror and amazement. Could it be really true that she was being insulted in her own house? The thought lent her strength to control her first inclination, which was to rush into the presence of Mrs. Lorrimer and accuse her of treachery and dishonour. No! she would make sure that there was no mistake before she committed a possible blunder. Her cheeks burnt as she pondered on the idea that all her household might have been pitying her for a dupe; but if she discovered that Agnes's hints had any foundation, she would show the world that

she would be a dupe no longer. She did not leave her own apartments until dinner was ready, and then she descended to the dining-room in a dark dress that would not attract observation. Colonel de Crespiigny and Mrs. Lorrimer were rather late that evening. They had been taking Arthur to an afternoon pantomime, and came in together, laughing and full of spirits. Muriel tried to appear cheerful also during the meal. She was most anxious to avoid them having a suspicion of the state of her mind. She was very unused to intrigue, poor child, and felt as if her very looks must betray her intentions. But as the dinner drew to a conclusion, her husband unconsciously helped her out of her difficulty.

“Well, what are we going to do this evening, Muriel?” he asked with the pleasant smile that had never a suspicion of deceit in it.

“Anything you like,” she answered in the same strain.

"Well, I'll have my pipe as usual in the library, and then we'll meet in the drawing-room and you shall give us some music, eh?"

"Just as you please, Arthur."

"If you'll excuse me for half-an-hour, Lady Muriel, I have an important letter to write before the last post, and will go to my own room for the purpose," said Mrs. Lorrimer.

"All right," replied Muriel, as her guest ran upstairs. She felt the letter-writing was but a *ruse de guerre*, and that Mrs. Lorrimer would soon find her way down to the study, so she hastened to get there before her.

Her husband, who had not finished his wine, pulled her down towards him as she passed his chair.

"One kiss, my sweetest," he whispered, as fervently as if he had never kissed another woman in his life. Lady Muriel bent her lips to his, but inwardly she recoiled from

an embrace which seemed only second to that of Judas, and, as soon as she could disengage herself, she hastened to the study and peeped cautiously in. The fire was burning brightly, but the lamps were lowered and the room was empty. Before the door stood a large black and gold Japanese screen with many folds. It was the easiest thing possible for Lady Muriel to conceal herself in the corner of the room, which the last fold converted into a perfect hiding-place. Quick as thought, she darted into it and stood close against the wall, trembling with anticipation of what her manœuvre might reveal to her. She had not long to wait. A few minutes after, Mrs. Lorrimer came stealing down, and stood with an expectant air before the fire. Had she been caught, she would have had a dozen excuses at the tip of her false tongue. It was so natural that she should find herself out of pens, ink and paper wherewith to write that important

letter, and the study was of course the proper place from which to get what she required.

But she had not been there a second before Colonel de Crespigny joined her, and had the discovery taken place then she would have pleaded the need of her trustee's advice on some point of which she was ignorant. However, they believed themselves to be safe and alone, and de Crespigny having closed the door and lighted his pipe, they indulged in a private conversation, during which Mrs. Lorrimer made no secret of the connection between them, of their joint interest in her son, nor of her dependence on him in monetary matters.

She did not abuse Lady Muriel, nor even mention her name. She would have liked to do so, doubtless, but though the colonel was so weak that he had not the moral force to break off a friendship that pandered to his vanity, he would not have suffered Mrs. Lorrimer (nor any woman at that period)

to speak against the wife whom he loved as much as it was in his nature to love anything that ministered to his pleasure. Lady Muriel, however, heard sufficient to set every nerve in her body quivering with a desire for revenge. She stood behind the screen, biting her lips to keep down the passion which she feared would get the mastery over her, and praying that she might have the strength to control herself till they had left the room. She had not long to wait. Either the colonel's pipe had not its usual flavour that evening, or he had had enough of Mrs. Lorrimer during the afternoon, for in about half-an-hour he rose, and stretching himself, proposed they should adjourn to the drawing-room.

“I must run up to my bedroom again, I suppose,” exclaimed Mrs. Lorrimer with a giggle; “or stay—she will think I have been downstairs to put my letter into the post-box, so come along, dear. I shall be

glad myself of a cup of tea." And putting her arm familiarly through his, she walked with him out of the study.

Lady Muriel only remained there until she had given them time to reach the first landing, when she, too, left the room, and gained her own apartments by a back staircase. As she entered her dressing-room she rang the bell for Rosette, and ordered her to lock the door and prepare her for bed.

"I can see no one to-night, Rosette, not even the colonel," she said hastily. "Now, remember, they are my orders. I have such an attack of neuralgia in the head, I must have complete rest. Will you go downstairs and tell him so, and ask Mrs. Lorrimer, with my compliments, if she will be kind enough to take the task of entertaining him off my hands until the morning."

The tinge of sarcasm in her message was not recognized by either of the recipients, and the colonel was most anxious to make

her rescind her resolution and grant him an interview. He even wrote her a note to that effect. But she was obdurate. She declared that nothing but complete quiet would do her any good, and she did not wish to open her mouth, nor hear any one speak until she was recovered. Her husband grumbled at her decision, and Mrs. Lorrimer shrugged her shoulders and wondered where Lady Muriel had learned her obstinacy, and whether she had been permitted to give herself such airs in the household at Revranches. She made a remark to the same effect, as Agnes Prudhomme was undressing her for the night, but the lady's maid answered her with hints and suggestions that sent her to bed in a state of mortal terror. For if Lady Muriel *should* have taken offence at anything *she* had said, or done, Mrs. Lorrimer knew that her little pretence of a reign in the house in Queen's Gate was over for ever.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### OPEN WAR.

WHEN Colonel de Crespigny found the next morning that his wife still absolutely refused to admit him to her presence, he became both puzzled and angry. A horrible suspicion of the truth took possession of him, and he met Caroline Lorrimer at the breakfast table with a face of portentous gloom. She was not feeling particularly happy either, for Agnes Prudhomme's malicious hints were rankling in her mind, but she tried to carry off her want of ease, by an assumption of extreme cheerfulness.

“Well, and how is the dear wife this morning?” she exclaimed, jauntily, as he entered the breakfast-room. “Is she coming

down to perform her duties as hostess, or must I take it upon myself to pour out the tea and coffee again?"

"I cannot tell you. I have not seen her yet," he answered.

"Not been up to inquire after her even? Oh, you naughty man. Is that what you call being an attentive husband?"

"I didn't say I had not inquired after Lady Muriel's health. I said I had not seen her, and for a very good reason—she refused me admittance."

"Dear, dear," cried Mrs. Lorrimer sympathetically, "I didn't think she had such an unfortunate temper as all that. Can she be ill? Shall you not send for a doctor?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Caroline. Lady Muriel is neither ill, nor ill-tempered. I am afraid it is something worse than either."

"What can you mean?"

"I think she must have gained a sus-

picion of the true state of affairs between you and me."

"Impossible! How could she? I have hardly looked at you in her presence."

"I know you have been careful, so have I, but these things have a wonderful facility for cropping up, and women are intuitive creatures—particularly when they are wives. Anyhow, I have never known Muriel like this before, and there must be some strong reason for her behaviour."

"Oh, fiddle-de-dee," cried Mrs. Lorrimer nervously (for she didn't *feel* like "fiddle-de-dee" at all). "It's only your fancy, Arthur. It is quite *impossible*. Lady Muriel has an attack of the sulks—that's all. She is cross, most likely, because you took Arthur and me to Drury Lane yesterday, without consulting her. Take no notice of her fads, and she'll come down to luncheon as usual. You are making a great deal too much of it."

"I hope I may be," he said, as he rose from table, "but I don't feel comfortable about it at all. However, I shall go out for the day, and when I return to dinner I hope it may have blown over. If she should happen to mention the subject to you, Caroline, you must do your utmost to disabuse her mind of the idea."

"Of course I shall; but wives are terribly unreasonable. They are jealous even of their husband's friends."

"Well, I shouldn't care for my wife to have many friends of *our* sort," replied de Crespigny significantly, as he left the room.

Lady Muriel had ordered Rosette to let her know as soon as the colonel quitted the house, and when the intelligence was brought to her, she sent down a message to Mrs. Lorrimer to say that she desired to see her in her dressing-room.

She was robed with as much care as usual, but she was looking very ill. The

poor child had passed a sleepless night, not so much because the discovery she had made had caused her heart to ache, as that it had given her a shock, which had altered her opinion of the whole world. It is a terrible thing when our eyes are first opened to the deceit and double dealing of which human nature is capable. We begin life, as a rule, with so much trust in our fellow-creatures, so much belief in what they tell us, so much faith that they will not fail to fulfil all they have promised to do. And then we find they have lied to us, have spoken evil of us behind our backs, have deceived us in every possible way, and the trust, and belief, and faith crumble to dust under our feet—not only for them, but for every one—and we cannot recall them even for the sake of the one or two true friends we may meet whilst journeying through this wilderness, where all is barren from Dan to Beersheba. And Lady Muriel was so ignor-

ant of the world, and the ways of men, and the falsehoods they consider it *a point of honour* to utter to women concerning their own sex, that the discovery she had made was the greatest shock that could have fallen on her, and shattered at one blow all the feeling she had entertained for Colonel de Crespigny. Had she loved him very dearly, she might have felt more sorrow and less indignation, but as it was she experienced nothing but a deep sense of the wrong done her, the humiliation to which she had been subjected, and her determination to let Mrs. Lorrimer know that it must be put a stop to—at once and for ever.

She sat, like a little queen on her throne, in the luxurious *fauteuil* before her fire as she waited the issue of her message to her guest. Excitement and indignation made her eyes blaze, and painted a deep spot of crimson on either cheek. She felt, indeed, now that she

had left childhood and girlhood far behind her, and was a woman, resolute and able to avenge her wrongs. Mrs. Lorrimer (who had really no idea how much Lady Muriel knew of her treachery) entered the room, smiling and affable, and with an outstretched hand to greet her hostess. But somehow Muriel didn't see that hand. She merely said "good-morning," and inclined her head towards a chair, whilst she turned to address her lady's maid.

"Go downstairs, Rosette, and do not return until I ring for you. Mrs. Lorrimer and I have a little business to transact together."

"*A little business,*" echoed Caroline Lorrimer as soon as the servant had disappeared. "Have you a commission for me, dear Lady Muriel? I shall be only too happy to execute it. What can I do for you?"

"Only one thing, Mrs. Lorrimer," replied Muriel, as she rose and stood before her companion. "You can leave my house."

"*Leave your house!* It is impossible that I understand you rightly. *Leave your house!* What can you mean, Lady Muriel? What have I done to be so insulted?"

"You have done *this*, Mrs. Lorrimer. You met my husband in the study last evening, and talked to him freely, and I overheard your conversation. I don't think I need say any more."

Caroline Lorrimer's pale complexion turned to a livid green as she heard the words. It was impossible to defend herself. She was like a rat caught in a trap, and like the rat, she turned and tried to bite, only because there was nothing else left for her to do.

"So that is the way that Lady Muriel de Crespigny rewards the devotion of her husband and his friends, is it? Eavesdropping. Well, if I caught a servant in my establishment doing so mean a thing I should dismiss her without warning."

"Don't presume to speak to me like that,"

cried Muriel, angrily. “ You are not fit to speak to me at all. It was a despicable act on the part of Colonel de Crespigny to invite you to my house, and still worse in you to accept the invitation. How *dared* you brave me, madam, in my own house, and what reason is there that I should not expose your infamous conduct to my household ? ”

“ A very good one, Lady Muriel—that you have no witnesses to attest anything you may say. I have always behaved as a lady should do whilst in your house, and if (as you say) you have overheard anything you have no proof to bring forward of the truth of it.”

“ I want no better proof than what my own ears afforded me. I was behind the screen last night whilst you talked with the colonel, and I know now that you are his cast-off mistress, and he is the father of your child.”

The term “ *cast off* ” put all Mrs. Lorrimer’s prudence to flight. There are women who

would rather be suspected of sinning than of having no admirers, and of continuing to sin than of having been compelled to relinquish it against their own free will. She jumped up from her seat and advanced upon Lady Muriel as though she would strike her, whilst her green eyes seemed to fade into neutral tints with rage.

“*Cast off,*” she repeated between her discoloured teeth. “*Cast off!* That is what *you* think, is it? We will see which will be cast off first. You—or myself.”

“So you own to it, you disgraceful woman,” cried Muriel, as enraged as her guest. “Then I have but one more thing to say to you—*leave my house.*”

“We will wait and see what Colonel de Crespigny says to that. I am confident of *his* opinion on the matter when he hears of the indignity to which I have been subjected.”

“Then you must ascertain his opinions in

your own house, for I forbid you to remain in mine."

" You *forbid* me, Lady Muriel? I have yet to learn that this house is yours. I have always understood that it belonged to Colonel de Crespigny, and that he married you without a farthing of your own—just as if you had been a pauper."

" Whether it is mine or his, Mrs. Lorrimer, I am at least the mistress of it, and I command you to leave it."

" *Then I refuse,*" replied the other doggedly, as she sat down again in her chair and set her teeth together like a bull-dog. Lady Muriel was white as ashes and trembling like a leaf. Her impetuous, passionate nature, which had had so few opportunities hitherto for indulgence, began to assert itself, and she could have flown at her rival and strangled her on the spot. But the force of education and breeding restrained her, and she turned and rang the bell instead. Not a word more

passed between them until Rosette appeared, and then her mistress addressed her in set tones.

“Rosette, I wish to dress. I am going out. Open the door for Mrs. Lorrimer. She is going downstairs.”

This was a hint too broad for even Caroline Lorrimer to refuse to take, and with the same look of sullen obstinacy upon her face she rose from her chair, and with a stiff bow passed out of the room.

The lady's maid saw there was something wrong between the ladies, but it was not her business to comment upon it. She dressed her mistress in a handsome walking costume of velvet and fur, and received her directions to order the carriage to be round in a quarter of an hour.

“I am going to spend the day with Lady Rhylton, Rosette,” she said in explanation of her movements. “Tell the servants to see that every attention is paid to Mrs. Lorrimer

during my absence, and if Colonel de Crespigny returns before I do give him the note I have left on my writing-table."

She walked leisurely downstairs on the thick velvet pile carpet, but not a sound of her footfall reached the ears of Mrs. Lorrimer (who, incensed and somewhat afraid, was shut up in her own room), and the carriage containing Lady Muriel de Crespigny had rolled away in the direction of Oakley Court long before her guest knew that she had left the house. When her hostess did not appear at the luncheon table, however, and she learnt the reason of her absence, Mrs. Lorrimer became really alarmed lest she had gone to repeat the scandalous story to Lord and Lady Rhylton, and awaited the return home of Colonel de Crespigny with considerable trepidation and fear.

When he arrived, a little before the dinner hour, his first inquiry was for Lady Muriel.

"Her ladyship has gone to Oakley Court

if you please, sir," replied the man who had opened the door to him.

"*To Oakley Court!*" repeated the colonel.  
"But she will be back to dinner, I suppose."

"I think not, sir. Madame Rosette said her ladyship had gone out for the day, and left a note for you, if you please, sir."

"Tell Rosette to bring it to me in my study at once," exclaimed de Crespigny, who felt the shadow of an unknown dread creeping over him.

As soon as the note was placed in his hands he tore it open. It contained only these words :

"I know everything about you and Mrs. Lorrimer. She refuses to quit the house, and therefore I have done so. My father is the proper person to resent the insult you have put upon me.—MURIEL."

As de Crespigny read the words his dark face flushed purple. He had never been

placed in so awkward a predicament before, or met with a woman so resolute to stand up for her rights. He felt inclined to curse the whole sex and himself for having had anything to do with them. As soon as he could collect his scattered senses, he rushed upstairs to the boudoir with the note in his hand. Arthur was, as usual, lolling on the sofa, whilst his mother, yellow with anxiety, sat before the fire, shading her face with a newspaper.

“Send that lout out of the room,” cried the colonel fiercely as he entered it; “here, Arthur, cut at once, you’re not wanted,” and as he slammed the door after him he turned to Mrs. Lorrimer and, holding out the note, asked :

“What is the meaning of this?”

“You must tell me first what it is.”

“A letter from my wife to say that she knows ‘all about’ us—whatever that may mean—and that as *you* have refused to leave

the house, *she* has been compelled to do so. In God's name, what has happened?"

"A most disgraceful scene, in *my* opinion," returned Mrs. Lorrimer. "Lady Muriel summoned me to her dressing-room this morning, and insulted me grossly, after which she ordered me to leave the house as if I had been a discharged servant, and as I have done nothing to merit such treatment I refused to obey her until I had ascertained your wishes on the subject. Then she ordered her carriage and went out. I know nothing more."

"But how did she insult you? What did she say?"

"That she hid herself behind the screen in your study last evening, and listened to our private conversation—the most disgraceful admission I have ever heard from the lips of any woman calling herself a lady."

De Crespigny's face became almost as livid as her own.

"But—good heavens! you don't consider, Caroline. Muriel must have heard *everything*! You spoke of Arthur and our former connection, and the allowance I made you. You have let the cat out of the bag with a vengeance. How often have I begged you to be more cautious how you spoke—even to me—of the past? You have put it out of my power now even to remain your friend."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Had you been contented with my offices of friendship we might have been happy together to our lives' end. But I shall have no alternative now but to give you up altogether."

"Oh! Arthur, you *cannot* do such a thing."

"I *must* do it. My father-in-law will be down on me next for insulting his daughter by bringing my mistress into the house. A man could hardly be accused of a worse action, and I cannot allow such a scandal to become public property. Why the d—l

didn't you go when Lady Muriel told you to do so? Then she would have remained here to confront me, and I could have prevented this story travelling to Oakley Court."

"You would have had me turn out of your house at the instigation of a girl like that? Impossible! You must be mad to think I would do such a thing. Why should I succumb to *her*?"

"Because she is *my wife*," roared the colonel, "and the legal mistress of all I possess, and no one can be admitted here of whom she does not approve. I was a fool to sanction your visit, but all would have gone right enough except for your own folly. You have gone too far, and taken too many liberties—that's the truth of it—and you must pay for your indiscretion. How long will it take you to make your preparations to leave? I must follow Lady Muriel with as little delay as possible to Oakley Court, but I will see you safe to Bryanston Square first."

“But to go at a moment’s notice,” gasped Mrs. Lorrimer, “and during the absence of Lady Muriel; what on earth will the servants think of such a proceeding?”

“D—n the servants,” replied de Crespigny. “I am thinking of my wife and her parents, and what *they* are saying at this moment about us at Oakley Court. I hope to be able to induce Lady Muriel to return home with me to-night, and I certainly shall not do so unless I can assure her that the coast is clear.”

“And so *I* am to be sacrificed in order to gratify the caprice of a girl who will never love you one half as well as I have done,” exclaimed Mrs. Lorrimer, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

“You *must* hear reason,” cried de Crespigny. “Whether Muriel loves me or not has nothing to do with the question. She is *my wife*, and you are——”

“*The mother of your child!*” interposed Mrs. Lorrimer solemnly.

"*Perhaps,*" said Colonel de Crespigny indifferently.

"Arthur, do you mean to insinuate that you can doubt——"

"What I mean to insinuate, my dear Caroline, is that it is of no use your trying any longer to trade on an old affair that was done with years and years ago, and which I heartily wish had never occurred. For your sake I should have been glad to remain your friend, but you see that your imprudence has put that out of the question. I am quite convinced that before this unfortunate business can be patched up I shall have to take an oath never to see you again."

"And you will keep it?" she inquired, with a dangerous look in her eyes.

Colonel de Crespigny was about to say "Yes," but he saw the look and checked the affirmative that was already on his tongue.

"Well, not *exactly*, perhaps," he answered hesitatingly, "but all communication on your

part between the two houses must be stopped at once, and when I *do* see you it must be in strict privacy, and away from Bryanston Square. I will not give your servants a handle for gossip any more."

"Why not say at once that you intend to desert us," she said with clenched teeth.

"Because that would be untrue. But come, Caroline, we have no more time for bandying words to-night. If you cannot make up your mind to leave the house with me I must go on to Oakley Court at once, in which case I shall not bring my wife back here until I have received the news of your departure. Don't you think the first plan will breed the lesser scandal?"

"And you will not even wait to have your dinner?"

"How can I eat," he cried, "when your cursed folly may have been the means of upsetting all my domestic comfort?"

She rose then, but before she left the room to make her preparations, she gave him a parting shot.

"You make a great deal more fuss over it than Lady Muriel did," she said with a sneer. "I fancy she was rather pleased than otherwise to have an excuse to get away from you for a few hours. But it is always the way when a man marries a girl young enough to be his daughter. He becomes a dotard, and she—well, the more circumspectly she behaves herself in public, the more opportunity it gives her to indulge her fancies on the sly."

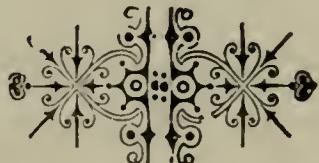
"Don't presume to say a word against my wife," exclaimed the colonel angrily, though he winced under her suggestion.

"Oh, dear, no ; of course she is perfection at present. It is early days to judge of her fidelity, but only wait till she has become as sick of you as you have of me and my poor orphan child," cried Mrs. Lorrimer, as

she burst into a flood of angry tears and rushed quickly from the room.

The colonel paced up and down the boudoir rather uneasily until she joined him again. He possessed a very jealous temperament and (like most men who have lax principles) he was always ready to believe others to be as bad as himself. He thought no woman was to be trusted further than she could be seen, and Mrs. Lorrimer's remark about Lady Muriel had roused a fear respecting her which he had never felt before. When his friend reappeared, pale and reproachful, to announce that she was ready to take her leave, he bundled her and her boy and her possessions into a cab as if he longed to thrust the sight and memory of them away from him for ever. For the sake of appearances, however, he accompanied them to Bryanston Square, and after a cool and business-like parting on the doorstep, drove off in the opposite direction

and made all the haste he could to Oakley Court, where he arrived just as the family party had separated after dinner.



## CHAPTER IX.

### A FLAG OF TRUCE.

DE CRESPIGNY's first inquiry on reaching the Court was for the Earl of Rhylton. He was afraid to meet his wife before he had seen her father. He trusted to his old friend to understand how such a *contretemps* as the meeting of the two ladies might have come to pass without any fault on his own part, and to persuade Lady Muriel to accept his promise that it should never occur again. Still he looked rather crest-fallen as he was ushered into Lord Rhylton's smoking-room, and the earl merely nodded his head and received him in utter silence.

“This is a very awkward business,” said de Crespigny as the servant closed the door

upon him, “but I can assure you, Rhylton, it was none of my doing.”

“What the deuce made you admit the woman to Queen’s Gate?” demanded the earl, laying down his pipe. “Do you want to insult my daughter, sir? If you *must* keep up these foolish *liaisons* (though what you can want to be running after every petticoat you see at your age, I can’t think), why on earth don’t you keep them to yourself? Lady Muriel has blurted out the story to the whole Court, and it’ll go hard but it will lead to a separation between you. And after only six months’ marriage! It will be a nice scandal for the Society papers.”

“My dear Rhylton, I beg of you to hear *my* version of the story. Mrs. Lorrimer is not at all what you imagine. I will tell you the whole truth. Years ago (when I was out in India and she was a passable-looking woman) I confess there *was* a flirta-

tion between us, and I believe it pleases her to suppose there is a certain relationship between myself and her son. But it is only conjecture, and I have never encouraged the idea. At present she is nothing to me (and never will be anything) but a friend. If you saw her, my dear Rhyton, she would be the best witness I could summon for my defence. But you know how these old worn-out *amours* cling to a man. I have no doubt there is more than one lady in London at the present moment who asks an occasional favour from *you* on the score of an old *empressemement*, eh?"

At this accusation the earl's hawk-like features were seen to relax into a grim smile, and de Crespigny saw that his cause was won.

"What can you expect with men of the world like you and me, old boy," he continued, with a playful dig in the side of his friend. "We cannot *quite* turn into brutes,

however much the remembrance of past favours may pall upon us. But my fault lay, of course, in ever allowing Lady Muriel to meet Mrs. Lorrimer; but that was done, unfortunately, at the picnic I gave to Maidenhead, and before I had any assurance that your daughter would do me the honour to become my wife."

"But Muriel tells me, de Crespigny, that this lady has been staying with her son in your house, and holding secret interviews with you (one of which my daughter overheard), when she has alluded openly to your continued interest in her."

"But against my will, my dear lord, I most solemnly assure you," interposed the colonel. "Unfortunately she *did* intrude herself on my [privacy last evening and made some references to the past which I deeply lament my wife should have listened to, but I have done my best to remedy the evil. As soon as I received the note Muriel

left for me, I took Mrs. Lorrimer and her son back to their own home and made her plainly understand that all communication between us must be entirely broken off for the future."

"Yes, that is all very well and the least thing you could have done under the circumstances; but I fear it will not go very far with Muriel. You see, de Crespigny, she is very young and with no knowledge of the world or the state of society, and this discovery has shocked her beyond measure. She was like a wild creature on her arrival here, and Lady Rhyton had the greatest difficulty to prevent her telling the story to the whole house. She seems to consider she has been so wronged and insulted by your marrying her whilst that woman exists, that it is not possible you can live together again, and I am afraid you will find it difficult to alter her opinion."

"That is the worst of such young girls,"

said the colonel moodily. “They are *too* innocent. They expect impossibilities. Such men as they desire to marry are not to be found in Christendom.”

“Perhaps so; but you will allow, de Crespigny, that *your* code of morals has always been rather an elastic one, and I did hope when you married Muriel that (if you found it impossible to give up your natural propensity for general love-making) you would at least keep your peccadilloes strictly to yourself.”

“But I *do*, my dear Rhylton,” exclaimed the colonel eagerly, “that is to say, I *should* were there anything to conceal, but I call Heaven to witness——”

“Look here, de Crespigny,” interrupted his companion, “I am not a religious man, and I daresay you have the best possible intentions, but I would rather not hear you swear anything upon the subject. All you have to deal with now is your wife’s dis-

position towards yourself. If you can win her forgiveness for this outrage, I shall be only too glad, for I am naturally anxious to avoid a scandal. And I may tell you for your comfort that my wife is on your side, and doing all she can to persuade Muriel to return to your protection. In fact, we have had quite an argument upon the subject. Now, what do you propose to do?"

"I want to see my wife."

"Shall we send for her here then? I am afraid that if you ask her leave first she will refuse it. Although so young, she is very strong-willed and resolute, and you had better take her unawares."

"Just as you please, my lord," replied de Crespigny moodily.

The earl rang the bell, and desired his private attendant to inform Lady Muriel that he wished to speak to her in his own room.

“And you need not mention that I am not alone, Jessop,” he added confidentially.

The valet bowed and retired, and in a few minutes Muriel entered the apartment. Her husband had partially concealed his tall figure behind a curtain, and for the moment she believed her father to be the only person there.

“Did you send for me, papa?” she commenced, in a melancholy voice; but then catching sight of the colonel she drew backwards, and added, with considerable dignity, “Pardon me, I did not understand you had a visitor. I have no wish whatever to speak to Colonel de Crespigny.”

But the earl had already put out his hand to detain her.

“Muriel—as your father, and with a right to your obedience—I *order* you to stay until you hear what your husband has to say to you.”

“Nothing he can say will have the power

to alter my opinion, or my feelings," replied the girl proudly.

"But you will at least listen whilst I speak to you?" interposed de Crespigny. "Surely *I* have a claim on your obedience, Muriel, as well as your father?"

"I don't acknowledge it, sir," she answered. "Marriage is a contract, and when one of the parties to a contract breaks his engagement, it becomes null and void. You have neglected to honour me, and I see no good reason why I should obey you."

The two men gazed at her in astonishment. She appeared to have gained ten years in manner and expression since the day before.

"If that is your opinion," said the colonel humbly, "we will say no more about it. We will waive the duties of marriage altogether, and speak only of those of love. And as *your lover*, my darling, let me implore you to overlook the first fault of which I have been guilty towards you."

“*My lover!*” echoed Muriel scornfully. “Would *my lover* have brought his mistress and his child into my very house to insult me by their presence? It is unlucky you should have chosen that name for yourself. It reminds me of the lover I have lost—the only lover I ever had—the man I was fool enough to give up for you. Oh! papa, do you believe that Athol Fergusson would have outraged my feelings like this?”

“Hush! hush! my dear,” said Lord Rhylton uneasily; “*that* is all past and gone, and much better not alluded to.”

“And such tender reminiscences cannot be supposed to bear much interest for *me*,” interposed de Crespigny, with flaming eyes.

“And how much interest do you suppose *your* tender reminiscences have borne for *me*? ” retorted Lady Muriel. “What do you think *I* have suffered since I learnt the truth, and knew *who* it was you had introduced to me as a friend? ”

“Muriel,” said the earl, as he laid his hand upon that of the angry girl, “neither de Crespigny nor I deny that you have just cause of complaint, and that he is to blame for having placed you in so awkward a dilemma. But you are viewing the whole matter in a distorted light. Your husband assures me that this lady, Mrs. Lorrimer, is nothing to him at the present time, nor ever will be. He deeply deplores the weakness which led him to invite her to the house, but he promises it shall never happen again, and for the future he will treat her as a stranger. And under the circumstances, I really don’t see how he can do more.”

“You are right, papa! He cannot restore my faith in him, nor in any of his assertions, and I have *done* with him,” cried Muriel passionately, “and I refuse to go home any more.”

“But, my dear, that is nonsense. You *must* go. You are bound as a wife to obey

your husband's orders, and he has come to the Court to take you back to Queen's Gate. And so be a good girl, and kiss and make it up again. No marriage would last twelve months if such trifles as these were taken *au grand sérieux.*"

"Muriel! my darling! Say you forgive me," exclaimed de Crespigny (though his eyes were still bloodshot from the remembrance of what she had said concerning Athol Fergusson), "I am so deeply humiliated by what has passed. It was all my fault, dearest. I am a brute not to have remembered how innocent you are of the ways of the world, and how terrible such a discovery might prove to you. But had it not been a thing of the past, I would not have presumed to bring her into your presence—*you*, the only woman I have ever loved in the whole course of my wretched life."

His face was glowing, his eyes moist with repentant dew, the hands which he clasped

about her were hot and trembling with agitation. It was by such means as these that de Crespigny worked upon women and moulded them to his dominant will. There was a magnetism in his look and touch and voice, that they could not resist, and which controlled them against their sense of right. Even as he pressed his suit on Muriel, her frame trembled, and the angry light died out of her eyes, to be replaced by a look of forgiveness, though she knew he had no claim to be forgiven.

“It is such an indignity—such a humiliation,” she murmured, “even our very servants know that this woman has a claim on you.”

“She has *no* claim on me, my dearest. She is no more to me than the lowest scullion in our house. There *was* something between us ages ago, but I thought she had forgotten it as completely as I have. She took me as much by surprise

last night as she did you. I have been explaining all this to your father. And when I returned home this evening to receive your note, and learn the cause of it, I sent Mrs. Lorrimer back to Bryanston Square at once and made her understand that she had cut herself adrift from me for ever."

"But when all is said and done, I am only her successor," said Muriel bitterly ; "you call yourself *my* lover, but you said the same to her before you did to me."

At this the colonel could hardly repress a smile, to remember to *how* many women he had said it before her, but he preserved a discreet silence on that point.

"I don't think that I ever *did* say it," he replied mendaciously ; "but if I did, what then? *You* are my wife—the mistress of my house and heart—the only woman who has a right to issue an order concerning it, or me—and I love you from the bottom of

my soul. Will you not pardon me this once, and I give my sacred word of honour that such a thing shall never occur again."

He folded the girl in his arms as he spoke and covered her with passionate caresses, which she had no power to resist. It is very sweet to be loved, even if one does not love very warmly in return. The French proverb says, "there is always one who kisses, and one who holds out the cheek"—and during Lady Muriel's married life, she had never done more than allow herself to be passively embraced. She did so now. The tears were still standing on her cheeks that had risen at the remembrance of Athol Fergusson, and she felt nothing but repugnance for the man who had deceived her, yet he was her husband, and for that reason she submitted to his endearments. After all, she had not long held to her first resolution never to return to him. Lady Rhylton had become vehement at the prospect of such an alternative,

and told her step-daughter in very plain and somewhat coarse language what she thought of her folly, in even thinking of such a thing. She represented the inconvenience, the misery, and the scandal of the proceeding, in such vivid colours, that Lady Muriel shrunk from the idea of what might lie before her, and decided that she could not endure it. She could never feel any trust or confidence in her husband again, but whatever she might have to bear, should be borne under the ægis of his protection. And so, she cried a little from the very feeling of impotency that pervaded her, and hesitated to give her answer, though she knew well enough what the end of it would be.

“ Say you forgive me, Muriel. Don’t make me miserable for evermore,” pleaded the colonel in passionate tones.

“ I dare not say, I will *not* forgive. We all have so much need of forgiveness,” she whispered in reply; “ but you have made

me very unhappy, and I am afraid it will be a long time before I get over it."

But the addendum troubled the colonel very little. His wife had consented to return to Queen's Gate, and prevent an open scandal, and that was all that he desired.

"Only, there is one condition," continued Muriel, "you must let me take my sister Cecil Seton back with me, and you must promise to leave me to myself, and to her, until I have become a little more reconciled to this terrible discovery. Give me time to recover myself, and to look my marriage with you in the face, and then, I will try to do my duty, as if all this had never happened."

Colonel de Crespigny didn't like the conditions imposed upon him, but Lord Rhylton seconded them, so he was compelled to submit, and after a little further conversation, Lady Muriel slipped upstairs to put on her things, and acquaint Cecil with her decision, and the gentlemen went into the drawing-

room to Lady Rhylton. The countess was extravagant in her felicitations at the happy turn affairs had taken. She had been aghast at the prospect of Lady Muriel de Crespigny taking up a permanent abode at Oakley Court. She would have been no incumbrance to them, for her marriage settlement was amply sufficient to supply all her needs, but her presence would have been a continual foil to her step-mother and a bar on her amusements.

Cecil was very different. She had been so curbed and brow-beaten that she hardly dared say her life was her own, far less make an objection to anything she did not approve of. But Lady Muriel was too frank and outspoken to please the countess, and the idea of having her as a perpetual guest had been a very unpleasant one. So the relief to Lady Rhylton's mind was immense, and she gave vent to it in noisy compliments.

"And so, dear Lady Muriel was actually

going to run away with her Cecil. Well, perhaps it was best. Young people loved each other's company. And how delighted she was to hear that the silly child had become reasonable at last. Ah! Colonel de Crespigny had been too good to her. That was very evident. He mustn't continue to indulge her in that manner, or he might have trouble in the future. But all was well that ended well. And here *was* dear Muriel, ready dressed to start. What, going so soon, darling? It's not yet ten o'clock. Ah, well! you're in a hurry to get home I daresay. Lovers' quarrels require a lot of making up. *Au revoir!* and don't spoil my poor little Cecil, or I won't take her back again. God bless you all!"

And talking "nineteen to the dozen" Lady Rhylton let them at last go on their way. Only the earl, as he placed his daughter in the carriage which was to take her home, held her hand for a moment and asked:

“Are you quite satisfied, my dear?”

“I am satisfied to try again, papa,” she answered gravely; and then the carriage drove off, and she sat in it silent and thoughtful, with her hand fast locked in Cecil’s.

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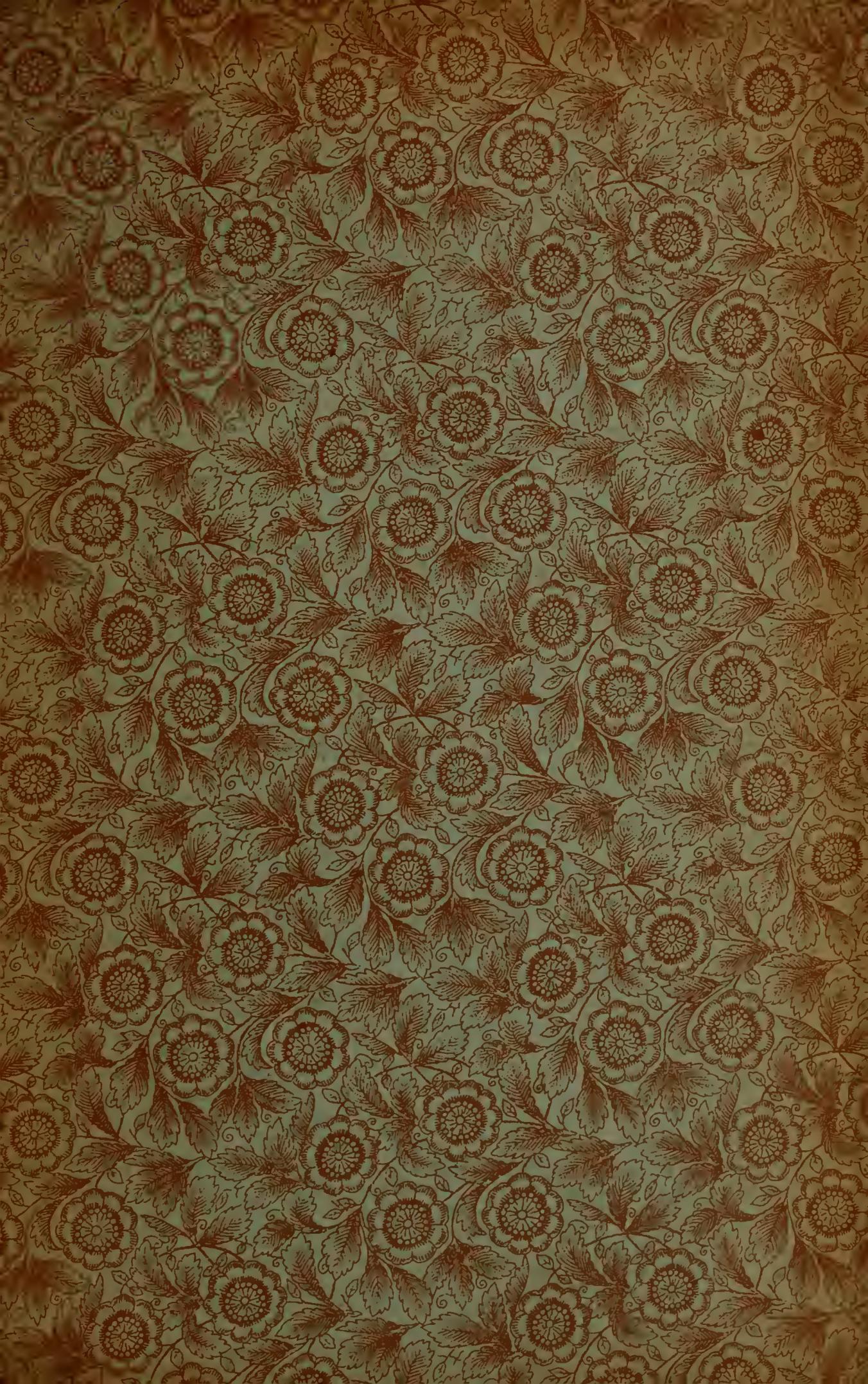
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